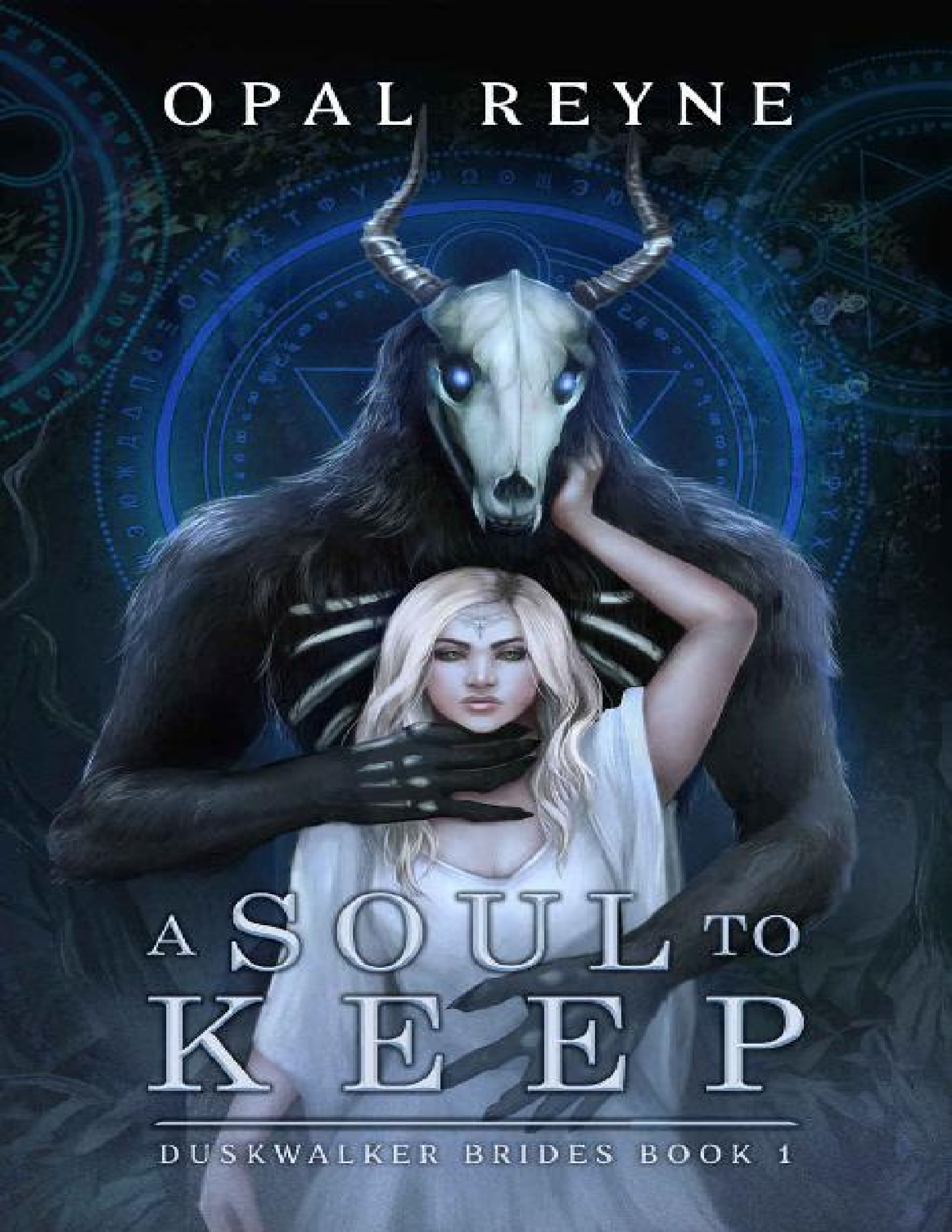
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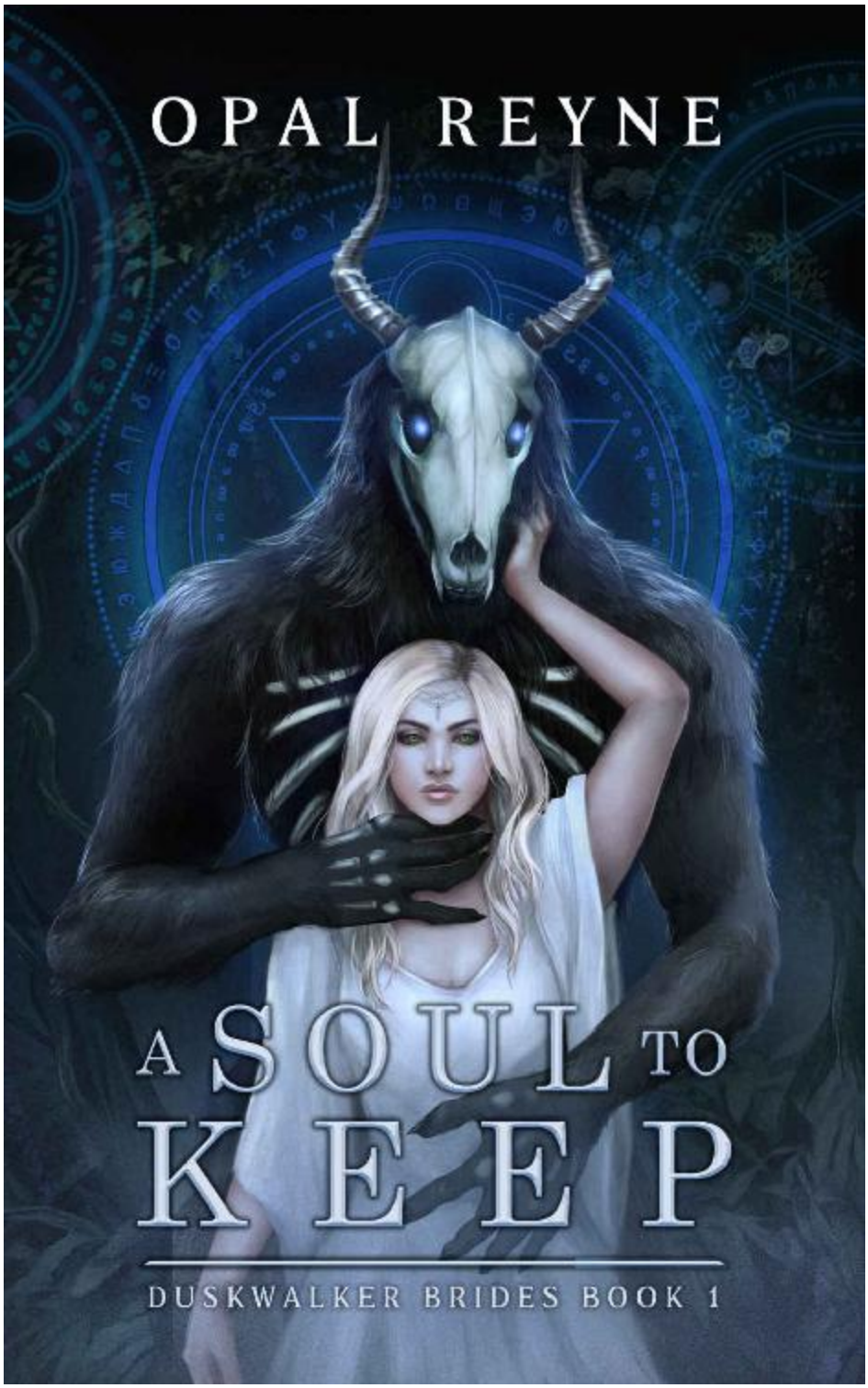
DUSKWALKER BRIDES BOOK 1



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A Soul to Keep

Duskwalker Brides
Book One

Opal Reyne

OceanofPDF.com

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To all the MonsterFuckers out there,

This book is for you.

Don’t pretend that you’ve never wanted to be railed by some human eating, dark entity that has a skull for a face – you saw the cover, you knew what you were getting yourself into, and you still chose to open this book and read it.

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For as long as she could remember, there had been monsters.

Demons that lay in wait in the shadows. In the snow, in the trees, in every shadowy crevice possible. The disgusting creatures sought the darkness as they listened and waited for their prey. Swallowed by the yawning depth the moonlight did not touch beneath the canopy of leaves, they hid inside shrubs with claws ready to clutch unsuspecting prey.

They were evil. *Unholy.* Foul.

They terrified the humankind.

They haunted near cottages, houses, and towns to grow that delicious, mouth-watering scent of fear for themselves as though they found their prey sweeter if they were afraid. Howling and emitting crackling, clicking noises, like the rattling of dry bones together, they rustled trees and snapped twigs in the distance – anything to ensure the humans knew they were waiting for them.

Towns attracted the Demons by the sheer force of the scent alone, creating a feeding ground. Like a contagion, one terrified human ignited a stench throughout the entire village.

Along with human guards, walls made of towering wooden spikes circled the towns and kept them at bay.

But sometimes, it wasn't enough to keep them safe.

They came in many different sizes, which informed their prey if the monster in front of them would guarantee their death or not. The smaller the Demon, the less likely they had fed from a human before. With the bigger Demons, one could only imagine how many humans they had consumed to grow to their monstrous height, frame, and strength.

Their skin was black like a void, and they usually crawled around with a human-shaped head and body disgustingly meshed with animal parts. Their faces had human angles except for around their mouths, where instead they had monstrous fangs with some kind of muzzle.

Some had horns on their heads, others spikes. Some had feathers or fur, and others nothing.

Then there were those with bat-like wings sprouting from their backs who were considered ancient. Rare, but some of the deadliest because of the number of humans they'd eaten to obtain wings for true flight. These ancient Demons swooped from above, and before a person even knew they had been taken from the ground, a large, fanged-filled mouth stretched around their head and clamped shut with an explosion of blood and brain matter.

There were only two ways to avoid being caught in the clutches of these monsters. People could either live secluded from the towns that drew the attention of the Demons, or live confined within their walls.

If one chose to live within the towns, they could only walk from the relative safety of the town walls in the daytime, when the light of the sun kept the monsters at bay. It was their only comfort, that most, but not all, of the Demons couldn't withstand the light.

Those that lived secluded did so with small families and erected their houses in the middle of clearings to protect them throughout the day.

At night, windows had to be closed, doors locked, and it was best not to make much noise or create too much light in order to remain hidden. They also relied on spells placed on the walls by human Priests and Priestesses who travelled the world to help the many towns and their residents. The spells were weak and easily broken, but they kept the smaller Demons at bay. The ward would not stop a torrent of them, however – or the strongest ones.

Thankfully for humankind, most of the Demons that terrorised the world were small. It was the only thing they were thankful for considering the horrible state of the world.

All these monsters lived in the Veil, the place they called home and where it was believed they were created. It was a large expanse of forest, as far as the eye could see, making up one fourth of the entire continent. Surrounded by cliff edges, the shade of the trees never seemed to allow any space for the sun to touch the ground. It was a place all these creatures could roam freely – even in the daytime.

That was the only solace for humans. Demons couldn’t stand to be in direct sunlight and often fled to the safety of the Veil throughout the day.

No one dared venture near that frightful place, and anyone who had never returned. No one knew what lie inside of the Veil.

It was a place of nightmares.

But, despite the Demons and the Veil, there were beings even more terrifying. There were nightmarish creatures that roamed the world as terrible omens. Those that could walk in the sunlight. They were nothing like the Demons, believed to be something else entirely.

Duskwalkers.

To see one meant death was near. Not just for humans, but also the Demons, animals – everything. They were terrifyingly intelligent. They could speak, they could bargain, and they could destroy if their mood decided it.

Some villages, far, far away from where she lived, had never encountered one. Most humans would live their entire lives and never see one, nor speak to someone who had. Unfortunately, that had never been the case for the town she called home.

Even from when she was little, she'd known about Duskwalkers. That if she saw one in the distance, to *run*.

The easiest way to spot a Duskwalker was their face, or rather lack thereof.

The Duskwalker that presumably lived closest to them in the Veil walked around with black clothing that covered its body from neck to feet. It also wore a black cloak that covered its head.

One could have presumed it was a human from behind, based on its attire, if it weren't for the fact that it was seven feet tall with Impala antelope horns jutting through two holes cut into its black hood. If it faced you, you would see a long-nosed wolf skull as it stared at you with glowing blue orbs that floated in its empty eye sockets.

The Duskwalker never travelled alone, always accompanied by two black ethereal wolves that had blue flames wisping through their fur. Their faces were skulled as well – like they copied their master – and they were disturbingly silent. Their paws never crunched in the snow in winter or rustled the leaves in summer. They didn't huff their breath. They didn't howl.

They only made a strange, warped bark of an animal that sounded as though it was dying, and they only did it on command of their master.

To see a Duskwalker, and his companions, roaming above the Veil in human territory meant it had been ten years since it had been last seen, and it was looking to make a bargain in one of their towns once more.

And apparently, *Reia Salvias* was going to be offered up as a sacrifice.

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“For as long as we can remember, there have been monsters,” Reia said with a stern, yet dull voice. Lifting her arms, she allowed the Priestess dressing her to deftly clad her in a white dress. “Why do they believe I am the reason for them now?”

The dress slipping over her body was simple enough.

It hugged her curves around her torso before it hung loosely around her hips and legs. Lace cuffs were frilly as they draped long and wide around her wrists, swaying each time she moved her hands. Although her hands stopped at her mid-thighs, the frilly sleeves draped down to just below her knees.

Other than the long sleeves having lace, the only other place there was lace was around her waist that then trailed down in front of her, reaching a V down to her knees.

It appeared to be terribly made, but it was remarkably soft, like a cotton cloud, against her sensitive skin.

“You know why,” the Priestess answered with a curt tone. “They have told us you are a harbinger of bad omens.”

The Priestess – since that was all Reia could call her by as they didn’t share their names – was dressed in a white cloak that had large purple runic symbols painted into the seams of the cloak. Every seam around the hood, the sleeves, the

opening down the centre, and even the hem that danced just above the ground were covered in purple runes.

They all wore white clay masks with accents of gold decorating each one. The woman dressing her had decided to paint a cat-eye design around the mask's white mesh covered eyes, while the lips, that bore only the slightest opening so she could be heard, were painted golden like lipstick.

The Priestess sounded much older than Reia's twenty-six years of age, but instead of the kindness that she'd spoken with in her aged voice to the rest of the village, she spoke coarsely to Reia.

She was forced to watch herself being dressed in the oval-shaped mirror of this small room that was her entire house. The Priestess' gown disturbed all the hidden dust Reia hadn't managed to find and clean away. The dust glittered in the morning sunshine that washed into the timber floored room, not giving any indication of how grisly the day was to truly be for her.

Instead, it looked beautiful, peaceful, warm – despite it being so early spring that not a single flower could blossom under the remaining snow.

In front of her was her body length mirror, while next to it was her single wooden-carved bed that held the most uncomfortable mattress known in creation. It should have been made of fluff, fur, and wool; instead, it was made of straw and hay.

On the other side of the room was a small stone kitchen hearth she had to light with a match to cook. The dining table and singular chair – since she never had visitors – was right next to the hearth in this cluttered home.

The last piece of furniture she owned was a wardrobe holding the clothes she'd made by hand herself – the village people feared touching the clothing she'd wear – with rolls of ugly fabric tilted against it.

She didn't own anything else.

No jewellery, no housing decorations, no pretty paintings. Reia owned nothing but this tiny home that had been built for her just on the outskirts of the town between it and the walls of wooden spikes that surrounded it for safety.

I'm sure once I'm gone, they'll burn this house down.

It was cold since it was crudely made. Over the years, she'd worked into stuffing holes she found in the round timber slats with the leftover material of her clothing creations in order to keep the wind out.

"It's not my fault I'm the only one that survived," Reia grumbled to herself quietly as she was forced to place her dainty feet into a pair of white slippers.

She had not made this outfit.

It had been brought by the Priests and Priestesses who arrived earlier in the month. They came knowing the Duskwalker would eventually be approaching one of the three villages it visited once every decade. The dress had been cleansed, just as Reia had been when she'd been wiped down in some perfumed liquid that smelled heavily of herbs and oils. She'd hated every moment of the Priestess washing her body for her, but the Priestess claimed the spell she was using required her administrating it herself.

"That may be true," the Priestess said as she shoved a leafy, white, floral crown around her head. Reia's straight, blonde hair had been yanked of all its knots and looked shiny beneath the crown, a touch of green peeking out from the stems and leaves they'd used to weave it together. "But you are still the only one that did. You should have perished with the rest of your cursed family."

Reia gritted her teeth as her hands clenched into such tight fists that the back of her knuckles, which had been pink from the cold, turned white and pale like the rest of her skin.

"I don't know why the Demons didn't eat me like the rest of my family. Just because I survived, does *not* mean that I am cursed or a bad omen."

I don’t want to do this! Her life had been dictated to her by this village, every waking moment of it out of her control, simply because her family had died. Then she had been blamed for it! Blamed for something that had been going on for centuries. And now, she was being forced to sacrifice herself, wear this stupid little dress, because they were making Reia do it or she face the consequences. *It’s not fucking fair!*

Reia had only been seven when it happened.

She remembered very little about the night that two strong Demons, massive and large in her memories, had managed to break through the protective wards in place around her home, destroying everyone inside it.

Her mother, her father, her baby brother… even their dog, which hadn’t stopped barking, had eventually been eaten.

She knew she hadn’t screamed, hadn’t tried to run, hadn’t done anything but wait as her family was eaten. It had been dark which made it hard to see. The only thing she could truly remember were the sounds of crunching bones, tearing skin, the slurping of mouths, and her family’s dying screams.

She’d covered her ears to hide from the disturbing noises and sat in the corner of the living room, occasionally feeling splashed with a spray of blood. That was only the beginning of the massacre she would find in the morning when the sun finally illuminated the inside of the house.

She only remembered feeling sadness and loss, knowing her family was gone. She’d walked from her home as she cried, making her way to the village to tell them what had happened.

A group of three men had taken her back to her home and told her to explain what had happened. Really, they were trying to figure out how she was still alive.

They were already wary of her, and on the way back, they were attacked by small and medium Demons while walking through the forest in the late afternoon. Only one of the men

survived. She knew now that he had run from her just as he'd run from the Demons.

But despite their fear of Reia, the villagers didn't want the monsters to grow stronger by devouring even one more human. They refused to abandon her inside the forest to survive by herself in case a Demon fed upon her and grew more powerful.

As much as they thought she was a bad omen, they feared she would somehow grant them even more power if she was eaten – like she may be some kind of chosen human.

There is no such thing as a chosen human. Not even the Priests or Priestesses believed this. Other than being labelled as some harbinger of death, or darkness, or bad omens, Reia was an ordinary human.

Other than that one fateful night and day, there had been no more cluttered destruction from Demons around her.

Unfortunately, it had never been safe to walk the village at night. Those stupid enough to do so were sometimes caught, leaving nothing behind but a trail of blood. Even though it was uncommon because it was generally a flying Demon, and it had been happening since before she was born, she would somehow be blamed for it.

They would claim the person had spoken to her that day – although no one in the village spoke to her at all. Or that she'd made eye contact with the person and it solidified their coming death – even if she hadn't left her home.

"You survived regardless," the Priestess coldly rebuffed. "The Demons left you alone, that in itself is a bad omen. You are cursed, and you are probably the reason your family is dead."

The flames of anger burned in Reia's chest as a white cloak was tied so tightly around her throat that it rendered a gentle choke from her.

"Then why hasn't the village just killed me?" Reia asked, already knowing the answer.

She just wanted someone to say it out loud, hoping it would convince the Priestess to help her stop this.

“Because it is considered bad luck to kill a human who has been given the title of harbinger of bad omens.”

“Then is sacrificing me to the Duskwalker any safer?”

Behind her mask, the Priestess clicked her tongue as she applied golden eyeshadow to Reia’s eyelids. Then she dusted her cheeks with pink and rubbed a reddish paste against her lips that would dry smooth to tint them.

“We do not know,” she answered truthfully, after a short while of thought. “But they believe they are returning your tainted soul back to the Veil where all human sin belongs.”

Reia stamped her foot lightly in frustration while blowing a curl of her hair out of face, realising her plan wasn’t working. *I’ll have to be more direct.*

“Can’t you convince them otherwise? I lived for a reason. Perhaps I am actually a bringer of life and protection.”

The Priestess snorted a laugh, shaking her head underneath the hood of her white cloak.

“No. It is the choice of the village on who they will sacrifice to him. We have no say in this, especially since we do not know what will happen. This could bring prosperity to your people.”

“They are just trying to get rid of me!”

“True.” She sighed, stepping away as her mask tilted downward and then back up, as if she was looking over her outfit. “But he offers a protection ward that is more powerful than anything we humans can produce with our weak magic.”

“Your magic is considered just as unholy, and yet you aren’t allowed to be sacrificed.” Apparently, the magic inside of humans was disgusting, and Demons and Duskwalkers didn’t like the taste. For this reason, they were often left alone when travelling between villages and towns. “What if it is the same? We could anger him. He could kill me and desecrate the entire town at the same time!”

“You do not need to be afraid.” The Priestess stepped away from her while pulling back her sleeves. She knelt over a bucket of water to clean her arms and hands after touching Reia as though she was a vile disease. “You will become his bride. You will be safe.”

The thing was, Reia didn’t feel afraid. She was livid!

She had experienced her own family dying, and then had been treated as a disgusting outcast. She wasn’t allowed to speak to anyone, wasn’t allowed to look upon anyone.

The only reason she’d never been thrown into the prison cells permanently, despite the fact she’d never committed a crime in her life, was because they were worried about upsetting some higher cosmic power.

She was only allowed to live on her own and could only leave her home to get food from the other villagers in the ground square. Always at noon, the highest point of the sun, like they feared if it was any closer to darkness it would mean their certain death.

They gave it to her freely, but she would have to place her basket on the ground and wait for it to be filled while standing several feet away. The villagers tossed the food and water inside, often missing, and Reia would be forced to pick it up herself once they were gone.

“Then why does he need a new one every decade?” She wanted to shout her rage, wanted to kick and scream like a child, but knew it was pointless.

She was to be compliant, or they would toss her into the cell they had created beneath the ground and leave her there to rot. Even though she didn’t want to be sacrificed to the Duskwalker, she didn’t want to live inside a cell for the rest of her life more.

Maybe I can run away from him. She could find freedom since she had never been able to escape the village. The guards watched the only two exits and never permitted her anywhere near them.

She'd been caught a few times trying to climb the walls and they had tossed her inside the prison cell as punishment, which was why she knew how terrible it was down there. They were underground to save space within the village.

Reia knew just how dark, cold, and lonely it was.

Reia had fight in her, always had, always would. She wanted freedom. She clenched her fists once more. *I will be free.* She would not live chained in this village, nor to a despicable nightmare.

"We do not know. He may have a harem, he may kill them himself, they may not be able to survive in the Veil. We do not know if that place is safe for humans to even breathe. The shroud of darkness could be poisonous."

There was a black mist that hung like a cloud around the edges of the forest of the Veil that met the cliff walls and, occasionally, rose between the trees deep within.

"So, basically you are saying I'm going to die regardless," Reia stated with a dull expression. "How is that safe?"

"Is it not better than being trapped in this village, cursing the innocent people that live here? Or are you that selfish?"

Reia could almost imagine her raising a singular brow at her in question underneath her mask.

Reia's lips thinned in annoyance as she bit her tongue.

I don't care if I'm selfish.

The woman sighed and waved her hand forward.

"Come. He was spotted making his way towards this village yesterday." It was how they knew to make sure Reia was prepared since he was coming here rather than one of the other two towns nearby. "We no longer have to wait for his arrival. He will come today."

As if the woman had the power to see into the future like a soothsayer, a bell began to ring in the distance, warning them of his approach. Shouts carried to Reia's small home before someone yelled directly at her door, refusing to come any closer or even knock.

“The sacrifice is supposed to be someone who is pure and willing,” Reia stated, feeling a crawl of dread slipping down her spine like the ghastly cold finger of a ghost. Her eyes darted to the door while her feet remained rooted to the ground, not wanting to meet her death. “He will see through their lies.”

“You meet all the requirements. You are pure, since no man would dare lay with you. You are willing, as it is either this or the cell.” The Priestess opened the door to her home and held it open, waiting for Reia to leave. “And you will have greeted him knowing what he is and that you will become his bride. You are allowed to stay here and not greet him, other sacrifices have been prepared, but once he is gone, you will be taken underground to live the rest of your days.”

Once more, those flames ignited in her chest, spite-filled and hateful.

“Your hearts are all vacant,” Reia spat with venom in her words before stepping through the threshold.

Jingle bells that had been tied to the sides of her flower crown chimed with each step she took towards the town square – the balls inside them the song of her doom – where she would eventually meet her grim reaper.

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Reia’s dress was too long, and she had to lift the hem as she walked down the pathway that led from her outcast home to the town centre. Her white cloak dragged along the ground, weighted and heavy, but it did little to keep out the wintery chill as it sunk beneath her clothes. Goosebumps prickled along her skin before they danced throughout her body as light shivers.

Only those brave enough to lay eyes upon the Duskwalker dared to surround the centre, and they gave her a wide berth as she entered. They no longer seemed to fear looking upon her now that she was going to be taken away.

“Are you ready to go, *angelus mortem*?” the village chief asked, like them all, refusing to speak her very name as if even its mention would bring death.

Gilford was well into his life, at least forty, and sported an array of different wrinkles on his weathered face. He was strong, both in strength and in will, which was why he had been deemed the new chief when his predecessor died. He wasn’t very tall, but he still stood over Reia with his short brown hair, crooked nose, and full-fledged beard.

He had once been the town’s head guard and had protected the townspeople from many Demons. He was

trusted, and his position gave him the leadership skills required.

He waved his hand forward towards the path that would lead her to one of the gates on the side of the town. The gesture elicited a deep, confused frown from her blonde eyebrows.

She opened her mouth to speak, but as he looked upon her, his face changed from disturbed to nearly murderous behind his sharp, blue eyes.

Ah, so I'm still not allowed to speak even if I am about to be sacrificed to the fucking devil. Reia was only allowed to talk to the Priestess because the woman had been wearing a protection amulet somewhere beneath her robes.

She snapped her jaw shut, narrowing her eyes into a glare as she nodded. *I don't understand. I thought he was coming here.* Then she noticed that none of the other back-up sacrifices were here like they were supposed to be.

A short distance behind Gilford, the crowd of people desiring to witness the event followed. Of course, they stayed far away from her.

There were no trees in the town, leaving no place for a Demon to hide or use as shelter in the day if it somehow made its way over the walls. There were no shrubs, no greenery bar a few patches of grass; only dirt and houses.

They passed home after home that Reia didn't recognize as she'd never been allowed to visit anyone. She was taken to the border of the town where there was a large space between it and the protective walls.

There stood the two back-up sacrifices, their families crying and hugging the person who could possibly leave them.

"You better make sure he takes you, *angelus mortem*," the father of the girl similar in age to Reia demanded, narrowing his eyes over her head as he held her.

Clove was her name, and she had always been a strange child. Rather than being afraid of the monsters that

terrorised the village, she had been what most considered foolish, curious. Reia had no doubt the woman's interest in the Veil was the reason she had chosen to step forward to be sacrificed.

She was a beautiful, red-headed woman. That redness made her stick out in the white dress, cloak, and flowery crown she wore.

Darren, on the other hand, was the oldest of six siblings. He had jet black hair that was curly around the pale skin of his forehead and ears.

"Stop crying, Mother," he sighed before bringing her in for a hug. "I'm doing this to make sure we are all protected if the monster won't go with him."

Monster. They believed Reia was just as evil as the Demons that haunted them.

"I want to make sure Sally, and Tara, and…"

Reia stopped listening, knowing he was listing all his siblings' names as part of some grand speech claiming he was doing this to make sure they were all able to live long lives. *Blah blah blah.*

Noble. That was what Reia labelled him, but that was as much respect as she'd give him. He was one of the few people who often threw food at her from a distance in secret.

He had only recently reached his eighteenth birthday, and she would much prefer that he was taken rather than her. *He can go die a horrible death. He deserves it for being such a dick.*

The wall of spikes around the gate doors loomed over everyone, creating just enough shade this late in the morning that the village people stood around it in the sun, not daring to stand underneath it. Only her, the chief, the other sacrifices, and their families braved the shade alongside the three Priests and two Priestesses that were here for additional protection. Not that they could do much against the Duskwalker.

The bells that were being rung above halted and tension shot through Reia, especially when she was told to stand in the very middle of the clearing. The five robe-covered humans stood in a small ring behind her. Darren and Clove were a few metres behind them, both clad in white cloaks and dresses, despite Darren being a man, while their families had stepped away into the sun.

The Priests were swinging incense canisters on chains, attempting to hide the worst of any smell of fear. Reia doubted it would help.

Gilford stepped forward when four men pushed up the long slab of timber they used to lock out the outside world. Then they started pulling on the ropes connected to the gate doors to open them, allowing Reia, for the first time in twenty years, to peek at the world beyond the walls.

Her eyes should have wandered over the forest that was in the distance or taken in the beautiful sight of the snow-covered field where grass sprouted through the melting white. Her curiosity about the outside world should have taken her interest.

But her eyes immediately drew to the creature standing in the bright sunlight who had been waiting for the gates to be opened.

She clenched her jaw and swallowed thickly at the monster and his companions.

Even though many claimed he was human-shaped, his wolven-shaped, skulled face jutting out from the black cloak hood he wore didn’t allow for any thought other than inhuman.

Definitely not human.

However, he didn’t look like a Demon either.

He still appeared unholy and evil, especially with his floating, glowing, blue orbs that were more unsettling than they were pretty. But he truly appeared different to her vague memory of the Demons she’d seen in the flesh.

That did nothing to appease her wariness of him, of her uncertainty standing here in this wedding dress, of what was to come. *But I can flee him.* Once she was outside the boarders of this claustrophobic village, Reia could run.

She would pretend to play along, would pretend all the way to the Veil if she had to, but she would find a way to obtain her freedom. She would travel until she found a village that didn't know who she was, didn't know her as a harbinger of bad omens, and she would finally live.

Unfortunately, when he stepped forward, his trouser clad leg moving through the opening of his cloak, it brought to light just how large he was. The vast space between them allowed her to think he was smaller, but as he was granted access into the clearing and came through the gate, she saw just how much he towered over *everyone.*

The people watching scuttered back, shuffling their feet loudly as gasps rang out.

"Duskwalker," Gilford greeted brightly with a deep-seated tone of respect, skilfully hiding any fear or disgust he must have held. He placed one arm over his stomach while the other rose into the air behind him as he bowed. "It is an honour to greet you."

The Duskwalker gave no response as he walked closer and closer, getting taller and taller, until he paused just in front of the chief. His wolven companions slowly walked in behind him, silent, as if they weren't there, despite their muzzles being pulled back as if they were ferociously growling.

Reia's eyes moved from the bottom of his closed black cloak, all the way to his skull face, and then finally settled on the Impala antelope horns protruding through his hood.

The area became so silent she could hear the wind, and she thought she could almost hear the stammering hearts of all the people who were here to bear witness.

The anxious smacking of the chief's lips was loud after he swallowed what must have been an uncertain lump in his throat. The only reason they knew the Duskwalker was

staring at him – since his glowing orbs didn't show where he was truly looking – was because his skull head was pointed down in his direction.

Gilford stood at least a foot shorter than him and had to crane his neck to meet his stare head on when he unfurled himself from his bow.

"Ah, I am sure you are wary of who I am. Please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gilford Borilette. I am the new chief since Clement died twelve summers ago, and I know you visited one of the other villages last time you emerged from the Veil."

"You humans die so quickly," the Duskwalker said, his voice deep and dark, and surprisingly, quite smooth. That wasn't why most, including Reia, gasped. It was because he spoke without opening the jaws of his skull. "I grow tired of learning all your names. You will most likely be dead the next time I come here."

Gilford visibly flinched at the coldness of the Duskwalker's words.

"Well—"

"I have little care nor time. It is a long way home. Where is my offering so that I may leave?"

His head turned up, easily seeing over the short man to stare directly at Reia in her obvious white cloak and wedding dress. Her back instinctually stiffened under his scrutiny, yet she lifted her chin confidently.

"Ah, yes. The willing sacrifice as payment for a protection ward against the Demons." Gilford stepped out of the way, waving his hand to the side so that Reia could be presented fully. "Pure and knowing of her future."

The hounds remained where they were as the Duskwalker stepped forward to approach her. His footsteps crunched in the dirt but were light despite his heavy-looking frame. He dipped his bony skull down to her just under a metre away, and she slowly lifted her chin to glare up at him through her lashes.

Reia expected the smell of blood or the rot of decay to waft from him like some Demons produced. She expected him to smell of death.

Surprisingly, he smelled of smoking mahogany wood and… pine.

That did little to ease her, although it was welcome in comparison. Her lips tightened as he looked down, casting a large, looming shadow over her.

It gave her a sense of foreboding – like she may never see the light again past this day.

Once more, a hush fell over the area. The air felt stagnant like the world was holding its breath as much as the humans who were desperate for her to be taken away.

The glowing orbs of his eyes, which hovered in front of the voids of its sockets, swirled almost like rotating fire. His skull was clean and appeared as though it was polished as the sunlight hit over the white of it and made it glisten.

I thought it would be cream-coloured. Or that, perhaps, the flesh of a rotting animal might be loosely hanging from it like a decaying corpse.

“What is your name?” he finally asked, quiet despite how close they were.

Shit. How am I supposed to give my name if I am not allowed to talk? Hell, the people didn’t even utter her name. How was she supposed to violate two things they feared without upsetting them?

Reia gave a sneering cringe, unsure of what she was supposed to do. No one had given her advice or told her what she should do if he spoke to her.

Shuffling her feet nervously, her eyes fell to the chief.

“Speak, child!” Gilford shouted, his face growing red with anger. Reia was making a mess of this already.

It was too late. The Duskwalker’s hand shot forward.

She managed to catch a glimpse of the dark, glistening claws that ripped through his black gloves before his hand encircled her throat. She expected him to lift her off the

ground, but he only brought her to the tips of her toes. The pressure was tight but wasn't suffocating as he bent forward to be more at her level.

"Reia," she managed to get out, calming enough to narrow her eyes into a glare once more. "My name is Reia Salvias."

Orpheus twisted his head at the petite little human he held onto, inspecting her face in detail now that they were inches apart and she couldn't escape.

Yes. It is much easier to see her like this. She was too far away before, too hard for him to look at bony face to human face.

He was unable to smell her properly since he'd shoved mud and grass into his nose hole to block as much of the scent of fear as he could. It was uncomfortable, and he despised it, but he needed to do this otherwise he would attack the village in a mindless craze because of their stench of fear.

Her hair was blonde, straight and glossy around the backs of his gloved fingers. Her nose was small, but had a defiant upturn to it, which made it appear more dismissive when she'd turned her chin up at him earlier. Her features were gentle around her jaw and chin, but were sharp around her eyes and brows, making her *glare,* he realised, more prominent.

Her skin was like snow, as though she hadn't been in the sun much, which he could tell was true by the transparent-

like paleness of her skin. If he took her to the Veil, he doubted her skin would ever ripen into the light golden that should have wrapped the warm meat of her slim body.

Her eyes were a forestry green, which pleased him.

Actually, looking upon her was pleasing, but he felt this way about most humans, for various reasons, some more evil and cruel than others.

As he inspected his sacrifice in detail, Orpheus waited for the tantalizing scent of fear to fill his mouth with saliva. He was so close to her. He would be able to taste just a hint of it that his blocked, clogged nose couldn't. He could only just smell her with their proximity, but it hid the rest of the humans from him.

It didn't take long. The scent gently lifted into the air from her pores, inciting the glow of his eyes to want to change from his normal blue to red in hunger.

But that didn't happen, his eyes remained blue.

He tilted his head when he realised the scent wasn't strong enough to stir true hunger in him.

This female, this human woman, was afraid, but not nearly as much as she should have been while being held like this by him. *She appears rather...* ***angry***.

"If-if she is not to your liking, we have prepared other sacrifices to become your bride," the one named Gilford sputtered in haste.

There are others? He lowered her enough that she was no longer blocking his vision, as two humans in white dresses were ushered through the Priests and Priestesses.

A dark-haired man and a red-headed woman.

"There has never been more than one intended offering," Orpheus stated, projecting his voice through his skull so it could be heard.

He had to actively produce his voice past his own mind, speaking from it since he didn't have lips or the kind of mouth to talk. He could make noises if he wished to, but they were often guttural and incoherent to others.

“We wanted to make sure we appeased you, is all.”

What is wrong with this one, then?

Orpheus placed the blonde-haired woman named Reia on the ground and twisted his head at her while examining her once more. *She appears to have all her parts.* He could see she wasn’t missing any limbs and didn’t have the look of deathly sicknesses that seeped from the skins of humans.

“Are you not willing?”

“She is!” Gilford interjected.

“I did not ask you,” Orpheus said, letting his voice come out as a deep growl.

“I am standing here, aren’t I?” she said up to him, rubbing her neck before frowning at her hand as though she couldn’t fathom why him holding her hadn’t hurt.

That is true.

It was obvious she was willingly standing in front of him to be offered while dressed in their strange custom of dressing all his sacrifices in white. He’d never understood that, why they had to be dressed in a similar style and colour.

“If you do not like her, there is Darren.”

The black-haired man bowed to Orpheus in greeting.

He waved his hand at him dismissively, his claws glinting in the sunlight. He retracted them to keep them hidden from the easily frightened humans.

“I received a male last time. I do not want another.”

They never lasted long with him. Even though they generally held less fear, they often tried to kill him. He would always make short work of sating one of his many hungers on them. He felt the light rumble of his stomach begging for meat.

Darren lowered his head and stepped away, refusing to argue with his easy decision.

“Then Clove, perhaps?”

“Hello,” the red-haired woman said with one of the sweetest voices he’d ever heard from a human. It was

gentle, almost like a song. “It is a generous honour to meet you.”

She curtseyed for him and even stepped forward. She looked willing; her eyes wide with a strange emotion as they moved over him now that she was closer. *Curiosity? Uncertainty? What is the emotion on her face?*

He hated to admit, even to himself, that he wasn’t particularly good with understanding human emotions.

He stared at her before releasing the blonde to step closer to the red-head. Fear, as well as tangles of other emotions, cascaded from her the closer he got.

It was strong enough that it made his eyes glow red and his mouth fill with drool. He quickly swallowed so it didn’t seep between the sharp teeth and fangs of his skull. He stopped breathing to hide from it.

The warmth in her skin paled and one of her feet stepped back when he towered over her. The other emotions she had been producing turned into fright now that he was actually in front of her. Her eyes darted from his glowing eyes to his claws as he reached forward to cup her throat to see how she would react. He retracted his hand before he even touched her, wary of how strong the scent from her was becoming.

This was how all his sacrifices were with him. Afraid. They were willing, but they feared him, feared where he would take them, feared what he would do to them. Delicious, delicious fear.

She is just as appetizing. Perhaps more so. He liked the brightness of the red in her hair.

However, Orpheus turned away from her and began to circle the one named Reia predatorily.

The fear in her scent he’d smelt earlier had gentled without his direct attention, and he was curious about it. *She is wary.* That was what he could smell. She wasn’t petrified since she wasn’t trembling or shivering in his presence.

I have only met a few like her. Even now, he could tell just from their faces that the humans gaping at him in the sun – who weren't at risk of being stolen away – were more afraid than this woman in white.

"Little human, why are you offering yourself to me?"

Orpheus had never asked this of a human while still standing in the town they came from.

He would eventually learn from them all why they were willing to be taken. However, he was truly curious about why this one was standing before him. It appeared she was willing. She had said so herself in a very vague way. But she was also… angry.

Is she angry with me or the other humans?

"To help protect my people," she answered through gritted teeth.

He tilted his head when he was in front of her once more, looking at her clenched jaw and creased brows.

A lie, perhaps? If Orpheus could grin, he may have.

"Yes. You will do." He brought his gloved hand out from his cloak and offered it to her. "You will become my newest human, snowy one."

"You will be taking her?" Gilford asked with a high-pitch of surprise, while the woman blinked at his hand in confusion.

"Yes, I have chosen the original sacrifice." He thrust his hand at the woman, demanding she place her palm in his.

After a few moments of staring at his outreach gloved palm, she hesitantly lifted her hand and slipped it into his far larger one.

Once more, he stopped breathing to avoid taking in any scents. His claws rushed out, and the middle one dug into the flesh of her wrist to produce a small droplet of blood.

That was all it took for a blue ring of light to illuminate around them, flapping both their cloaks – his black, hers white – as a burst of magical energy pushed between them. A double circle with ancient runic symbols between the

circle’s lines was cast upon the ground, lines forming inside the circle to create a six-pointed star.

Gasps rang out from the crowd as the woman tried to pry her hand away from his in shock, but he held firm until the protection ward was completed. Their union solidified as the magical contractor and offered sacrifice who gave their blood.

He wondered if the warmth he could feel from her through his glove was real, or a figment of his imagination.

He retracted his hand once it was done and severed the contact between them. Her hand flew to her chest as she cupped where his claw had cut into her skin.

“The protection ward is complete. Let us leave,” he demanded with a sense of mild urgency.

He strode forward to be behind her so she would begin to walk towards the gates, unwilling to remain in this human town any longer than necessary.

“Is that why you did that?” she whispered up to him as he pushed his hand on the small of her back when her feet seemed stuck to the dirt.

She stumbled forward before she began to move, Orpheus following with his palm remaining over her back and waist.

“Yes. Blood must be paid, and I cannot use my own.”

Gilford quickly rushed forward to walk beside them with a slight distance as Orpheus steered the confused woman between his ethereal companions.

“Thank you, *oh great Duskwalker,* for your protection. We hope you will be satisfied with your decision and bless us again in the future.”

It is hardly a blessing. His ward would disappear in ten years, and when he created a new one in a different town, the Demons from the new protected village would rush to this one when it was weakened to feed. Chaos would ensue.

Orpheus turned his face towards him, staring with annoyance hidden behind the fact he couldn’t make a single expression. He disliked the overly courteous way the

humans spoke to him since he knew it was a façade to appease him. Like that would be enough to stop him from ruining the town with claw and fang.

If I did not desire this void to be filled, then I surely would have.

They were afraid of him, hated him. They were disgusted by him, and he had no intention of building any form of trust when he very much may one day decide to become a malevolent spirit against them.

Ten years between each human did little to satisfy his hunger, and as the years grew and he got older, living on mind-numbingly endlessly, the more tired he was becoming of it.

How much longer will it be? An ongoing question without a matching answer. How much longer would it be before he found a human who wanted to be his companion?

Once he left the village, he finally dug out the hardened mud from his nose hole so he could be more comfortable and smell properly.

He turned his bony skull to the top of the blonde-headed woman in front of him. *Perhaps this one will be different.* If not, Orpheus would be back on the surface world to hunt for a new ‘bride’.

He rarely had confidence in his stolen humans.

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Reia ran after the Duskwalker as they made their way outside the village gates, which were promptly closed behind them with a definitive thud.

She paused, turning to face the wooden gates that had kept her trapped inside the town for years, feeling a sense of foreboding and yet... freedom. Well, a kind of freedom. It was more like she'd traded one prison for another. *Just how tightly will he hold the chains of my metaphorical shackle?*

For now, she needed to come up with a plan to get away.

As she stared at the gates, she wondered what she should do now.

"Hey!" she yelled when one of the wolves gave a terrifying, heart-sputtering bark at her ankles.

Her skin crawled at the harrowing sound. It sounded like the final crying bark of a dying animal, and vaguely like the mixture of a bear and dog at the same time.

"Get away from me!" she yelped at the other one when it snapped its jaws at her other ankle. She attempted to shoo it away by kicking her leg out.

It jumped back before the side of her poorly dressed foot could hit in the face.

"Unless you want them to bite, I would follow," the Duskwalker said calmly, his cloak hem flapping in the

distance.

It opened into an arch around his legs when the wind caught it from his long strides.

With a groan, Reia shuffled after him, surprised by how far he'd gotten in such a short amount of time. He had already reached the forest on the other side of the large, mostly snow-covered clearing that separated the town from the woodlands that surrounded it.

The bells hanging from her headpiece jingled wildly as she moved.

"We are leaving, just like that?" Catching up to him, her neck twisted so she could look over her shoulder.

The trees were already beginning to shield her vision of the town, each step taking her further and further away from it. Despite how much she hated it there, it had been Reia's home for twenty years. She felt a sense of loss at seeing it disappearing from her life – most likely forever.

Her warm breaths came out in quick huffing bursts of fog against the cold, chilly air with how much energy she'd used in sprinting.

"Why should we have remained?" She noted his voice seemed further away than right next to her, and she turned her head forward to find he was metres ahead of her. Once more, she quickly ran after him. "There is nothing there for either of us. It is no longer your home, and I despise being near the humans."

She turned her head back when she was next to him to find the village was gone. Her shoulders slumped when she looked away completely, knowing there was no point in checking over her shoulder anymore.

He was ahead of her again!

Fuck! He's so freaking fast.

"You didn't even allow me to collect my things."

Not that she really had any.

All she had on her was her clothes and a satchel of food they'd given her so she had something to eat along her

travels with him. It wasn’t much, only a few days’ worth, and she imagined it would only last her until she made it to the Veil.

Then she would be at the mercy of the Duskwalker to feed her, if he ever did.

“If you wanted to bring anything, you should have brought it with you when you greeted me.” He turned his head down to side to look at her. She guessed he was peering, but it was hard to tell with his lack of real eyes. “Was there something you left behind?”

“No, but no one told me to bring anything, so I didn’t really have the chance to think about it.”

Now that she wasn’t looking over her shoulder, she realised just how difficult it was to stay next to him with his long, yet unhurried, strides. He was much taller than her, towering over her by nearly two feet. Her shorter legs just couldn’t seem to stay with him without sprinting between certain steps.

It didn’t help that she kept eyeing the branches above, worried that a Demon would drop upon them. *It’s not safe, even in the daytime.* The shade, thicker in certain places, was enough to protect the Demons from the sun, and they could fall upon her at any time.

She sincerely hoped the Duskwalker would protect her even though she had a feeling he would eventually end up being her demise.

“H-hey, slow down. You’re too fast for me.”

As if to demonstrate this, when she ran those few steps to catch back up with his strides, her dress twisted around her feet.

Reia fell palms down into the snow that was thicker in the forest since the trees shielded the ground from the heat of the sun. Her forearms sunk into white powdery coldness, sending a course of shivers throughout her body. Her dress wasn’t warm enough to keep the cold at bay, and her feet

were freezing, one of her slippers already stolen by the snow.

He didn't assist her, and as she was getting to her feet, one of the nightmarish wolves – since they were more horrifying up close – barked at her. She stepped away from it in shock from the sound and fell into the other. Or rather, *through* it!

She gasped when its body broke apart like someone waving their hand through the wispy body of a ghostly figure. Darkness swirled before it came back together, and it snapped its head towards her when it was once again whole, snarling its muzzle silently.

"What the hell!?" Reia yelled, scrambling away from it on her hands and feet as her arse slipped across the ground. "What are those things?"

Nobody had known what they were, but no one would have guessed they weren't physical!

His voice was quiet with the growing distance as he continued to walk forward.

"You have discovered already that my companions are merely illusions." He lifted one of his arms into the air to point towards his own head. "However, it's not their bite you should have been afraid of to begin with."

With an agitated growl through clenched teeth, she waved her arms through the wolven apparitions that were lies. She stomped back to her feet.

"What will you do if I don't follow you?" she shouted at his back, refusing to step after him.

"I would come if I were you, snowy human."

"Are you fast?" She already knew the answer to that question with just how quick he was able to walk without putting forth any additional effort.

He finally stopped walking and turned his head to the side, showing her the side of his wolven skull face jutting nearly a foot past his cloak. *What is the point in wearing it if it doesn't actually matter? It does little to hide his face.* She

could just see the glowing orb that was partially hiding behind his cloak.

"I like the hunt," he answered, yet his voice sounded darker and deeper right before that orb changed to red. "But it makes me *hungry.*"

Reia gulped, knowing his eye colour change couldn't mean anything good. *Apparently, he eats humans and Demons.* It would be wise if she didn't make him… hungry.

Palming her forehead before running her hands up and then over her hair in frustration, she felt the floral crown around her head like a halo. She felt stupid in the attire she was in. The woven crown was tangled since she'd messed her hair by running so much, and she yanked it from her head before sprinting towards the Duskwalker while tossing it to the side.

He must have been watching her movements because his head turned to the side when she came up beside him. After a short while, he gave a huff, a small fog of breath leaving the nose hole of his tapered skull, before his eyes returned to blue.

He led their path once more.

"Did you lie in the village?"

"About?" Her heart squeezed, both in uncertainty of what he would do if he discovered she'd lied to him already, and having to force her body to keep up with his fast pace without tripping again in the snow.

She constantly had to lift the hem of her dress, causing the cold powder to press against her bare legs.

Her teeth began to chatter when her jaw jittered uncomfortably. She'd lost her other shoe, and her fingers and toes were becoming burningly cold. The backs of her knuckles were pink, and she had no doubt that her nose and toes were as well.

"About why you were offering yourself to me."

"What will you do dependent on each answer?"

“Nothing. I do not care if you lied because you were unable to answer in front of the other humans.”

Reia blew a curl of her hair out of her face, wishing her nose didn’t feel like it was freezing over. It caused a drop of liquid to drip from her nostril that she constantly had to sniffle away.

“Yes, I lied. It was either I allow you to take me or be locked in one of the prison cells for the rest of my life.”

He brought his hand up to cup the end of his bony snout.

“I see.”

“Look. I’m following because I can tell it’ll piss you off if I don’t, but I was not a truly willing sacrifice.” Reia tripped once more. Letting out a groan, she slapped at the ground while getting back to her feet. “Since that is the case, would you be willing to let me go?”

“No,” he answered, moving his hand away to duck his arm back inside his cloak. She could see the vague imprint of his arm moving behind himself to clasp his hands behind his back. “You offered yourself. Your blood was taken as the price for the ward, and I only did it to obtain you.”

“So, you don’t care?”

Well, shit. There goes that plan.

“It’s not that I don’t care. The price has been paid, the bargain made, and I do not wish to go back or travel to another village to obtain a new offering. However, all you chosen humans are *supposed* to be with me by your choices alone, whether that is to protect your families or simply because you don’t care for your own lives.”

Reia’s brows drew together into a deep frown.

“You understand I was coerced?”

“Yes, although that does not change your fate. I am uncertain, though, if I am displeased or not by the trickery of the other humans.”

“I give you permission to go back and wreak havoc if it will allow me freedom.”

“No.” He turned his head to her, his eyes turning red once more.

Reia brought her lips into her mouth and bit her lips shut. *Okay, definitely need a new plan.*

A cry was wrenched from her when she fell into the snow once more. *Shit, I can’t do this for much longer. I’m already tired.*

“Stop! You’re too fast, and I’m too cold. I can’t keep up with you.”

She heard the crunching steps of his feet as he stopped and turned around to her, but Reia was looking down as she pushed with her arms while shakily getting to her feet. She was already exhausted after what could only have been thirty minutes of chasing him, and the chill continued to creep deeper and deeper into her limbs, feeling as though it was freezing her very bones.

A yelp tore from her aching lungs when he picked her up, lifting her off the ground and into the air by her waist.

“What are you doing?” she asked when he settled her backside into the crook of his elbow with his arm curling around her mid-section to hold onto her.

His hand spanned her side right below her breast, cupping her ribcage firmly to make sure she wouldn’t fall.

“You’re complaining that I am too fast, and you are too cold walking in the snow.” She looked towards him to find that he was already staring up at her, his glowing eyes blue once more. “I do not wish to slow down. I will carry you.”

Reia held onto his forearm with one hand and his bicep with the other, feeling her hands digging into firm flesh, then he started to walk again, this time carrying her. She half-expected him to be cold, like the dead, but he was surprisingly warm. It seeped into her backside and torso where he touched her, and it felt as though it was melting the ice in her veins and muscles.

“Ah... Thank you?” she said with a frown not only on her face, but also present in her voice. “That’s considerate of

you, I guess."

"Cannot have you dying before you even reach the Veil. You humans die so easily, even from simple sicknesses."

She nibbled at the corner of lips. "And what will happen to me when we get to your home?"

"That depends solely on you."

She rolled her eyes with a mild huff. *That was an ominous answer.*

However, Reia did truly find him carrying her considerate. She hadn't expected any form of kindness from him. She kind of expected to continue tripping after him until she collapsed half-dead in the snow. The Veil was a four day walk from her village.

He may look monstrous, but at least his deep voice is nice. She couldn't help liking the way his voice sounded. Gruff, rough, dark, and hinting with warmth. *And then there is the way he smells.* Even now she could smell that smoky mahogany and pine aroma from him.

When she had been putting on this dress this morning, she had been expecting every minute with him would be a horror story. She didn't know what awaited her in the Veil with him, but a part of her had worried he wouldn't wait that long to eat her.

Still, Reia couldn't forget that he was a monster, no matter if he seemed to be thoughtful or even have some form of kindness within him. He was inhuman, something just as terrifying as the Demons, and she would always remember this.

For now, she was using the confusion and uncertainty of her situation to remain calm. She was angry with the people that forced her to currently be here with him, and she was using that to drive her forward rather than trembling in fear.

Just stay level-headed, you can do this. You can figure something out.

"Are you going to carry me the whole way?"

She dug her fingers harder into his body, curling her fingers around the material of his black jacket, when she felt how much the warmth from him was helping to ease the ache in her frozen fingers. If she could have reached, she would have pressed her feet against him as well.

“If I have to.”

She tilted her head forward, her hair curtaining around one side of her head as she looked over to him.

“Aren’t I heavy like this?”

“You weigh nothing to me. I could render your body into pieces with very little effort.”

Her back stiffed as she ducked away from looking at his face. “Are you trying to scare me?”

“You already smell mildly of fear.” Her back stiffed further. She hadn’t realised he could smell it and thought she’d been doing well to hide it. She was sure if it wasn’t for his arm around her keeping her steady, she would have fallen backwards. “I am merely telling you the truth.”

“You did not answer me.”

“But I did.” He turned his head to the side so he could see her past the hood. “I was explaining that I am strong enough to carry you the entire way, if you so choose. I am not trying to frighten you.”

Relief settled through her body like a cascading waterfall washing over her shoulders. She crossed her ankles, pondering this strange position she was in.

How many humans can say they’ve had a conversation with a Duskwalker while being carried on their arm? If she wasn’t so disturbed by that fact, she may have laughed.

“I’m going to be honest, I thought you would be more terrifying. I thought you would toy with me or drag me along the ground if I couldn’t keep up with you.”

She peeked behind her at the quiet wolves made up of void-like fur and blue swirling flames. They didn’t sink into the snow since they weren’t actually solid, and it made her

realise she should have known they weren't real now that she was aware of it.

"I can toy with you freely when I am home. Here is not safe for a human who does not wear protection, nor comfortable."

Way to go, Reia. Just shatter your own fantasies that this might actually be okay by saying something stupid. She had been hoping torture *wasn't* on the table.

She gave a deep sigh while allowing her eyes to span over the forest passing swiftly around them. The only colours she could see was white from the snow, the thick brown trunks of trees, and the green leaves that loomed over them.

A quiet peacefulness flittered between them, monster and human, as they walked. She felt her body bounce every time he took a wide step, his feet only sinking into the melting snow to just below his calves.

"So, do you have a name? Or should I just call you Duskwalker?"

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Orpheus felt his feet sinking into the snow as night fell upon them. The crunching sound did little to hide the clacking, like bones rattling together, and gargling noises of the Demons lurking in the darkness.

He could see clearly in the dark, his eyes providing a glow even if they did little to illuminate the area. They only brightened his bony face while keeping the rest of the area around him shrouded in darkness.

The creatures were able to detect her presence even from a distance. Although her human smell was causing a disturbance, they would never approach with Orpheus holding her.

They may have tried to grab her from above had he continued to carry her in the crook of his elbow with her above his head, but she'd asked if there was a way for them to rest. Orpheus wasn't interested in stopping, so he moved her until she was cradled in both his arms.

He could survive a few days without sleep, even if it tired him. He was nocturnal and slept throughout the day, but he had a feeling this woman would run if he slept before they reached the Veil. Once he was inside it, he knew the creatures lurking around his home would be a deterrent to her fleeing.

So many have run from me.

Stopping in the night brought danger to her, even if Orpheus could survive an attack from Demons. Unfortunately, he had no doubt the creatures would snap her neck before he even got the chance to rescue her if they were separated.

He dipped his jaw to his chest, twisting his head so he could see her past his snout. She was asleep, curled up as best she could while he held her. She was turned away from him. *Humans... So fragile, so frail, so weak.* He was currently the most dangerous thing to her.

If he curled his arms and hands around her much more than he already was, he'd squeeze the life out of her with his strength and burst her at the seams. He had to constantly put effort into making sure his claws didn't extend, otherwise they'd cut through her buttery skin.

It had taken her a while to fall asleep, most likely because she was wary of him, but she'd eventually fallen under just past midnight, despite her futile attempt to remain awake.

The moon shone just beyond the trees but was full enough to make the Demons unwilling to endure its subtle light, knowing it would burn them much like the sun if they were exposed for too long. Only the old and strong could remain in the light of the moon.

Orpheus had never needed to worry about the sun or the moon. He was called a Duskwalker for that very reason, able to walk freely in the day and the night.

He lifted the woman closer to his face, bending over so he could sniff at her neck. He gave a huffing sneeze and pulled away. *I hate it when the humans bathe my offerings in those herbs and oils.* It was hard for him to sniff through it, and he wanted to smell the true scent of the woman in his arms.

If he didn't like the way his offering smelt, he'd often felt a desire to destroy it. However, it helped to mask the worst of their fear so he wouldn't be suffocated in hunger, mindlessly falling upon the humans and devouring them. It was still

present, he’d always be able to smell it, but it was masked enough that it didn’t wrap around his mind like a terrible ache.

He disliked the fake scent wafting from his offerings, but it helped to give him time to lessen their fear before his ability to control his hunger lost against that delicious scent – sometimes. And sometimes, it just didn’t matter. No matter what he did, what he said, the human could not shed it.

She does not reek of fear. The subtle hints were to be expected. She no doubt thought he was a monster, and she was right to feel that way. However, it wasn’t strong, and if he was lucky, he’d be able to rid her of it completely.

I still do not have faith in her. Her asking to be released from their bargain had helped solidify that. Orpheus refused to allow himself even a flicker of hope. Other humans had also not been totally afraid of him, and they still hadn’t survived. *I do not trust her.*

A part of him knew this would end in failure.

He let his mind go silent, halting his thoughts to listen to their surroundings while he walked. There was no point in thinking of the future when it was uncertain. He didn’t have the ability to foresee it, and he wouldn’t allow the hollow of emotions that would come at his assumptions that it would be blood-filled and lonely.

It was well into the morning when she woke.

He’d managed to catch her wake since he’d been staring down at her, watching the sparkles of sunlight *glittering* against her snowy skin through the tiny gaps of leaves above them. It had been near-hypnotising, and Orpheus had been enchanted by the gentle beauty of it since he’d never seen anything like it.

Beautiful sights were not a common thing for something like him. He was used to darkness, was used to being shrouded in loneliness and solitude.

This had been a peaceful and pretty sight.

He was sure any human with any array of colour he'd taken, since humans had such different skin tones – something he was curious about – would have been just as appealing to watch with the sparkles of sunlight. He didn't think it had anything to do with Reia in particular.

It had never escaped his notice that the snow glittered as well.

I should carry all my offerings if this is something I would be able to see. He'd attempted to carry a handful, but they had immediately resisted, too frightened, and it would generally induce the emotion into something that made him salivate. He'd be forced to put them down and have them chase him until they collapsed in fatigue.

He'd always pitied them, but he wouldn't stop while they were out in the open.

I have not held a human in a long time. It had been decades, and the last time had been because it was dying, not by of his own hand. *I forgot how soft they are.*

Reia felt warm and soft, making him want to squeeze her tighter against his chest. *Can't do that, I will kill her.*

Her face twitched, starting in her cheeks as her eyes clenched tighter, before they fluttered open slightly. The green in her eyes was more vibrant than the forest she peered around at before they slowly came to him.

"Shit. I fell asleep?" Her eyes then narrowed into a glare. "Did you use a spell against me or something?"

Her limp body, relaxed from being asleep, bounced lightly in his arms from his steps as he twisted his head at her.

"No. I don't have such magic. I can only create illusions, cast protections, and other minor spells, but something must be sacrificed for me create them."

Her sharp brows drew together to create a deep crease between them. "You're not all powerful then?"

"No," he answered plainly, turning his head up to watch where he was going better. "My magic is quite minor in strength."

“How can you even use magic? Demons can’t, and only certain humans can.”

Orpheus was surprised she wasn’t demanding for him to cease cradling her like this. She hadn’t preferred this position over sitting in the crook of his elbow, yet she wasn’t asking to be moved straight to it now that she was awake.

“Some Demons can use very minor magic. However, there is one who can freely use magic and is even stronger than me.”

“Who?”

“Someone you do not need to concern yourself with. You will never meet him.” Despite his constant effort to not squeeze her, he couldn’t stop his hands from clenching around her.

No. She can never meet him. Orpheus tried to make sure none of his humans did, even though he wasn’t always successful.

“Fine, but you still didn’t answer my question as to why *you* can use magic.”

He said nothing because he didn’t want to answer. *They do not like it when I tell them the truth.*

“Orpheus?” she said with a frown in her voice.

His eyes turned to black, which was the only way she would have been able to tell that he’d closed them for a short while. *When was the last time I heard someone speak my own name?*

It was even said softly. It sent a tingling thrill throughout his body, ruffling his flesh and making his insides shudder.

Only a handful of offerings had deigned to know if he had a name, choosing to call him Duskwalker as if that was all that he was, but none had ever *spoken* it to him.

“Is the answer actually that terrible or do you not know?”

He allowed a tsking sound to resonate from his mind as her words caused his eyes to open. He turned his head down and twisted it to see her.

“I’ll give you a boon.”

Her relaxed body tensed as she lifted her arms to fold them across her chest. “Are you seriously bargaining with me over the answer that could be you simply saying you do not even know?”

He almost felt the urge to chuckle if he wasn’t so serious.

“Yes.”

“Fine. What’s the deal?”

“Say my name again like how you did before, and I will give you your answer.”

“That’s it? You just want me to say your name?”

“Yes, but like how you did before.”

He didn’t want it to sound firm or clipped, or have any tangle of anger or annoyance it. He wanted it to be gentle. He wanted to be gifted with the same feeling he’d been given before.

“Why, though?”

“Because I do not think you’ll want to say it again afterwards.”

She began to nibble on her lip, catching his attention as he watched one of her front teeth bite at it. *Look at how much they yield.* He didn’t have lips, didn’t know what they felt like to have them, and he could no longer remember if he’d ever had a set pressed against him.

“Orpheus.” She said it even quieter than before, even gentler, mingled with an emotion he didn’t understand. Shyness? Sheepishness? Perhaps even coy, like his name was a sensitive secret not to be shared.

His eyes closed once more, his head tilting back until his snout was pointing to the sky as an even greater thrill shuddered within his body. It was so pleasing it even made the inhuman parts of him ruffle and puff beneath his constricting clothing.

He allowed the moment to take him, to allow the feeling that had stolen him to remain. He even paused his steps so nothing disturbed it as it settled into his entire being.

That may have been worth years of torment to hear.

Schluk. Something sharp lanced through his right shoulder, embedding into it before it came out the other side. He didn’t step back at the force of it, but his arms clenched.

His sight opened, his vision red as pain stabbed through his core. He could see the shaft of an arrow sticking out from his chest with three fletching feathers, brown and dull in colour.

A course of a burning inferno flickered beneath the surface of his body. Hot, smouldering. It felt as though it turned into a hand that caressed the goo of his brain and wrapped around his mind to create a dull ache inside it. His vision grew redder, brightening until it was near blinding.

“Too tight!” Reia gasped when he clutched her in his irritated growing state, enough to stir his mind into loosening his hold, but not enough to calm him.

His jaw clinked and clacked when he separated it, his head twisting and twitching as a deep growl began to emit from the back of his throat.

“Put the woman down, Duskwalker!”

Humans. He could smell two, but not a shred of fear from them. *Demonslayers.*

Some humans had suppressed their fear to such a degree the smell of it was unable to be tracked by Demons, allowing them to remain mostly hidden as they traversed the world. These people often became Demonslayers; members of a guild of humans that hunted the creatures with tenacity and an unbending will.

In his more recent decades of trying to find a companion, they had begun targeting him. They thought Orpheus was evil, that he was nothing more than a monster like the Demons they hunted.

He bent over to lay Reia in the snow. Not because they told him to, but because Orpheus began to change his shape in rage; hungry and vengeful. His clothing morphed with him, seeping into his skin like his body was eating the

material. His cloak remained since it wasn’t pressing firmly against him.

The further he morphed into a different shape, the more it felt as though that numbing hand began to squeeze his brain and rendered his thoughts disturbed.

Forgetting completely about the human woman as though her presence no longer existed past his wrath, he launched for one of the two men who emerged from behind the trees holding bows and arrows. With claws bared and mouth open, ready with his sharp fangs, the intent to destroy and maim those that hard dared harm him gripped him firmly.

Mindless, like he was nothing but a bloodthirsty animal, Orpheus attacked.

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Reia flinched when an arrow shot through her vision right in front of her, accompanied by a disgusting schlucking noise as it embedded itself into Orpheus.

Her eyes widened at the shaft quivering right in front of her eyes. *That almost hit me!*

Then she gasped, the tightness around her stealing her shock as the Duskwalker tightened his hold on her to the point she felt like her body was being mashed.

She tried desperately to suck in a breath through her collapsing lungs.

“Too tight!” she managed to strangle out with the last of her breath.

His hold softened before he placed her on the ground.

Parts of her were torn in what she felt. Sympathy cut through her as he started to shake around her. She understood that he must be in great pain. A moment before, she’d felt a sliver of tenderness at his reaction to her saying his name a second time.

She didn’t know him at all, but she’d almost thought it looked… euphoric with the way his orbs darkened to black and his head was tilted back. She hadn’t known what his reaction meant, but she’d felt for whatever emotion it was.

If he were human, would she have been able to decipher it? Was it a sign of contentment, sadness, loneliness, or something else entirely?

Whatever it was, she felt she could relate to it, understand it.

He'd been kind enough to her so far. He'd been considerate holding her, allowing her to sleep calmly instead of making her trip after him like a cruel master.

So, when the arrow embedded into his shoulder, Reia almost reached up to touch at his chest around it. She was about to ask him if he was okay, but then a gut-tightening sound began to come from him. It was a *growlish* snarl, and she instinctually knew that was dangerous.

Oh... My... God! Her eyes widened in horror when he started to *change.* His bony head remained the same all throughout, but his clothing seeped into his body like a goo sinking into mud.

After he placed her down, his claws extended as short fur, much like the kind from an antelope, grew over his forearms. Then it became thicker and longer, like wolf fur, over the top of his biceps and shoulders.

His legs took on a new shape, dog-like, but she could see a long, deer-like tail swaying between his legs, pushed down by the black cloak he wore. Fish-like fins hung from the back of his elbows and the heels of his dog-shaped legs. Rib bones protruded *outside* his chest like the cage was resting over the top of flesh rather than beneath it. They also covered the knuckles of hands and feet.

And with his eyes glowing such a blood red colour, Reia realised nightmares were real, and it had just been cradling her!

The arrow continued to jut from his shoulder, and her mouth fell open. *Humans?* Her heart soared at being rescued.

He leapt for one of the Demonslayers, his human hands and wolven legs working in unison to ensure he was fast.

More arrows loosed, but he dodged around them and continued to sprint forward. The humans drew their swords as they prepared themselves for the attack.

Both were tall and appeared strong, like they spent every waking moment training to fight against monsters. They wore black clothing so they could hide in the dark of night while they hunted Demons. They were covered from head to toe, even their noses and mouths were covered. They had cloaks that hid the rest of their heads, and all she could see was a slip of human where their eyes were.

Orpheus' companions were nowhere to be seen, as if they'd disappeared.

Reia shuffled back as she watched his right arm raise behind him, planning to strike one of the humans with his large claws.

The other human was running towards her as though he trusted his companion to take care of the Duskwalker while he came to her rescue. *I can run away. They will help me.*

She got to her feet and started walking towards the Demonslayer.

"Thank you," she wheezed, a torrent of emotions swirling inside her heart. Relief, fear, *fuck*, just everything all at once. Reia didn't know how to feel. The snow wasn't cold around her feet as adrenaline coursed throughout her body and filled her with warmth. "Thank you so much."

She'd been planning to seek out Demonslayers if she ever managed to get away from Orpheus. Reia knew she had never been much of a frightened person, and she'd been hoping she could train with them one day.

She'd wanted to become one of them. Demons had killed her family, had ruined her life, and she wanted to get revenge for them, for herself. She'd been hoping to turn the fear that did grow inside her into something fierce, into anger and determination.

The Demonslayer grabbed her wrist and spun her so he could press her back against his chest. A choke cut through

her when the edge of his sword was placed against her throat.

“Stop or I’ll kill her!” he shouted next to her head.

“What are you doing?”

She kicked her legs, immediately squirming to get away from the weapon poised at her.

“Shut up, and be a good piece of bait,” he bit at her. “We’ve been planning this since the last time he left the Veil.”

The Duskwalker didn’t seem to be interested in anything other than the human he was attacking. She couldn’t see what he was doing past the back of his cloak, shielding his actions and the human, but nothing would be able to stop her from hearing the nauseating sounds he was making.

She heard growls, snarls, and that strange clicking and clacking noise the Demons made. It made her blood curl and caused ice to form in her lungs.

“Shit, he isn’t listening. At this rate, he’ll kill Hector.”

Reia tried to stamp on his foot to get him to release her. He only grunted in response.

“Why use me as bait? I’m pretty sure he was going to eat me when he took me to the Veil!”

“We don’t know why he takes you brides. The others could still be alive.”

At the same time a cry left her when he grabbed her hair tight enough to pain her, an arm was tossed limply to the side in a spray of blood. A *human* arm. The Demonslayer’s high-pitched scream pierced the air.

Her cry seemed to capture his attention long enough that his bony head turned towards her. He gave a sharp, pained roar and turned back to the Demonslayer he was attacking.

“Scream again,” he demanded while shaking her head by her hair. She winced in response. “Loud. Make him hear you or I’ll cut your throat.”

When the sword was thrown to the side by his teeth, the Duskwalker raised his claws to give a final strike.

“Now!”

When the blade pressed tighter, and she worried it might actually be cutting into her, Reia screamed, “Orpheus!”

It was too late. They both heard the choking gargle of the Demonslayer dying when he was hit. However, Orpheus turned his head sharply to them, and a roar sounded. He immediately spun around and began to sprint for them on his hands and wolven feet.

“Oh, shit!” the Demonslayer exclaimed.

Reia didn’t want to be in the middle of this collision!

She elbowed the man in the gut, and he loosened his hold on her. Both of them separated on purpose. Reia to run the hell away, and the Demonslayer so he could prepare himself for the Duskwalker that was about to barrel into him.

Nope. Nope. Nope. Lifting the skirt of her stupid wedding dress, she immediately started sprinting up the sharp incline of a hill to get away. *I need to run.*

She didn’t look back as she tried not to listen to the fight. She didn’t know how hurt the Duskwalker was, but she hoped it was enough that the other one killed him.

When she reached the top of the incline, she steadily sprinted across the mostly flat ground. The air felt colder as it cut into her skin like razorblades.

One thing she was certain of was that her hope had been misplaced. A howling roar sounded before the thumping of heavy steps followed as he gave chase.

I’m dead! I’m so, so dead.

She knew she’d gained a good distance, but he was fast, so damn fast. She imagined him running on all fours made him even quicker.

The snorting huffs he made were growing closer. They reverberated against the snow and trees, making him seem like he was coming from everywhere. Running was pointless, she knew it, but her legs wouldn’t stop moving.

I like the hunt. Those words he’d said to her the day before echoed in her memory. *But it makes me hungry.*

What should she do if he was going to catch her regardless? *He's already hunting me, though!*

A thought struck her. *What if I stop?* What if he didn't find her running, but rather standing there still?

Her steps slowed. It didn't matter what she did, she was going to be caught. If he liked the hunt, then she wouldn't continue it. It was her only chance.

Reia stopped and turned around to stand there with her hands clenched next to the sides of her thighs. *I should have just stayed there. I could have grabbed the Demonslayer's sword.* She could have had the honour of going out fighting rather than whatever the hell she was doing now*.*

A sacrifice? I'm a bloody offering, through and through.

She gritted her teeth. *I refuse to die afraid.*

Instead, she tried to turn it into anger.

Anger at the Demons who killed her family but spared her. Anger at the village who abandoned her as some form of curse, treated her cruelly, and then forced her to be here or be locked in a cell. Anger at the Demonslayers for causing this by trying to use her as bait against a monster that didn't care if she lived or died!

She would be angry at Orpheus, but he couldn't help being a nightmare. He'd shown her more kindness in his Duskwalker actions than any of the humans she known in the last twenty years.

Perhaps this was always meant to be my fate, Reia thought with a dark laugh when she saw him emerge from the edge of the hill.

He was running on all fours across the flat ground, huffing snorts coming from him. His eyes were a bright, deep glow of red, easy to see over the small distance. They were only thing she could clearly make out with his unbelievable speed.

It was the eyes of her grim reaper. *I hope I'm tasty!*

She clenched her eyelids shut right before he crashed into her.

Falling into soft snow, heat emitted from his body as he pinned her down by nothing but her own determination to make this as painless as possible. Heat drifted over her from his breath as it brushed over the entirety of her face.

She probably shouldn’t have opened her eyes, but a drop of liquid splattering against her cheek startled her.

Open jaws were slowly circling around her face as he brought them down around her head, his neck twisted so his jaws could come down either side of it. She felt the sharpness of one of his top fangs as it slipped over her cheek, but it didn’t appear to cut it.

His mouth opened wider and wider to allow her in.

The back of his throat was pitch black while his purple tongue was curled and twitching. Her last thought would be her curiosity about the colour, wanting to know why it wasn’t pink.

His breath should have been more unpleasant as it invaded her nostrils, but it smelt of smoky mahogany and pine with a hint of sweetness. The only reason it wasn’t truly pleasant was because she could smell the metallic tang of cooper blood laced with it.

Another speck of drool dripped onto her cheek as the crunching of snow crackled in her ears from his snout and round pointed jaw pressing into it. His tongue was now resting firmly against her cheek.

Reia felt a cut of fear slash through her, and a laugh slipped past her quivering lips. An unhinged, panicked laugh. *This is disturbing.* Watching his open maw preparing to crush her entire skull, in what she was sure was a single chop, to kill her was unbelievably unsettling.

She laughed more when her giggle echoed back through the crevice of his mouth as though she was answering herself from beyond the grave.

He paused, and her hands reached up to grab at the long fur around his chest, knowing this was the moment and bracing herself for pain.

Waiting. *Waiting.*

She giggled a little more, and it sounded loopier by the second.

A deep huff sounded right before his head started to back away.

Reia's brows drew tightly together when he brought his mouth away from her and shut it a few millimetres away from her nose. She could finally see his bony face properly. His glowing eyes were still red, but they didn't appear as strong as they had been when she'd seen him climb over the edge of the hill.

Blood was splashed across his skull and covered the tip of it completely.

His head shot forward, and the hard bone of his snout pressed against her cheek where she could still feel the wetness of his tongue from before. He sniffed her. Sniffed her! Quick sniffs that brushed waves over her.

"What are you doing?" The sensation was tickling, and her nerves were so fried she wasn't sure what else to say or do as she continued to clutch his fur.

"You taste of elderberries and roses. You smell of it."

Her fingers lost their grip when the fur began to disappear, forcing her fingers out as a black jacket began to push past the fibres. The dull glow of his red eyes faded out as deep yellow took over – a new colour.

"Is this what you smell like?"

He continued to sniff around her cheek, and a squeak left her when he dabbed his tongue at it.

"I–I thought you were going to eat me," she whispered, her hands falling limply next to her into the snow.

Her heart was beating so erratically she could feel it deeply pulsing and hear it in her ears.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but I was."

Now that things seemed to be calm, she could feel how much that confirmation caused her heart to jump a beat before it continued to race blood in her veins like a storm.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I do not know.” She could hear the frown of a confusion in his voice; an expression he’d never be able to make. “I have never had a human laugh as I’m about to eat them before.” He buried the end his snout against her neck and drew his tongue over it, making her flinch when a shiver shot through her. “I was also curious about why I could taste elderberries and roses rather than blood. You are lucky I am not so hungry now after eating parts of those men, I may not have come to my senses before it was too late.”

“Aren’t you going to eat me anyway?”

He licked her neck again before sniffing against it.

“That depends solely upon you. Although I can make no promises, that is not actually my intention with you.”

“It’s not?”

Reia truly thought he was going to take her home for dinner!

A yelp squeezed from her when he licked across her chest and dipped into the low cleavage of her dress enough that his tongue only just missed her nipple!

“It is strongest here, just above your heart.” He licked again, creating another yelp that came out strangled with a gasp. “Yes. I can sense what you smell like clearly now.”

Reia clenched her eyes shut.

What the fuck is wrong with me?! Those two simple licks over her chest, feeling how rough, yet slippery his long tongue was, had sent a charge throughout her body.

As though it was betraying her, her nipple on that side had hardened swiftly while the other was slowly firming behind it. A pool of heat had swept through her belly, building just above her core that contracted.

It’s nerves. Simply nerves. I’m just excited because he doesn’t plan to go out of his way to eat me!

That was it, that *had* to be it. There was absolutely, positively, no way that Reia was actually being turned on by a monster right now.

“Can you please stop licking me?” She squirmed a little, unable to get away with him above her. “You said you weren’t going to eat me, but it’s a little disturbing, like you weren’t actually telling the truth.”

He grunted, while his orbs turned a reddish-pink. He suddenly shot to his feet, revealing to her that he had reverted completely into the Duskwalker shape from before – the one with the human-shaped body and clothes.

He no longer appeared like the nightmare she’d seen but the creature who had stirred a moment of tenderness within her after she’d said his name.

“My apologies, snowy one,” he said calmly. Her thighs pressed together at the low, reverberating deep tone of his voice, her mind finding it even more appealing than before with her body tingling in such a disconcerting way. “I am sure you have had a frightening day, and we should go to our home.”

He reached his hand forward as though he wanted to help her to her feet.

Go to our *home.*

Her stomach twisted at the offer, at his words, and she was unsure why she didn’t hesitate to slip her own hand into his much larger one after she’d seen what he could turn into.

There was a gentleness as he hoisted her up. He gave her hand a tentative squeeze, almost as if he was squeezing it to reassure or comfort her.

“I hope you do not mind, but would you be okay walking on your own for a little while?”

He waved his hand to the left, his actions telling her they were going to continue walking in the direction they’d been heading all along and wouldn’t be returning to where the Demonslayers were.

Reia nearly groaned at the idea of chasing behind him while tripping in the snow, but just managed to suppress it. Now that her adrenaline was waning, the ice was already freezing her bare feet. Her toes were already aching.

“We aren’t going back the way we came?”

“No. Demons who have been hiding on the surface have surely already started devouring what I have left behind.”

She bit her lips together and nodded.

He started leading the way with his long legs, and she immediately followed.

“You must be strong,” she grumbled with her head turned away from him to hide her pout. “You managed to kill two Demonslayers.”

“It is not the first time I have been attacked by them. They occasionally lay in wait for when I take an offering with the intention to take my life. They know when I am coming, but they grow less successful every time.” A rolling growl made her snap her face to him to see his orbs were red. “They targeted you. Why?”

“As bait.” Reia’s lips twitched and her brows crinkled when she realised how easy it was to keep up with him. He was walking slower than he had been before. “They probably thought it would force you into a corner, like you’d do anything to protect me.”

She laughed at the ridiculousness of that. *Why would he care for my life over his own?*

“Protect?” His head twitched, but she wasn’t sure why. “Yes, that was what I was trying to do when I saw the sword against you.”

Her movements paused as her head reared back in unmistakable confusion. She remained planted where she was, watching him step away with the sound of his feet crunching into the snow.

“Your life is precious. I will try to make sure it does not end if I can.”

Her lips parted silently.

Is he saying he is actually planning to protect me? She couldn't understand that. *What does he want from me?*

It was only now that she was behind him that she could see the spots of steaming purple globs splattered on the ground trailing after him. When the arching hem of his black cloak slipped further forward, she could see they were coming directly from him.

"Are... Are you *hurt?*"

Why did a pang lance her chest at the thought? She should be satisfied he was hurt!

That's why he's walking so slow.

"Yes. I've been stabbed and cut a few times." He said it as though he didn't care, but she couldn't help feeling her deep well of sympathy growing.

He was even limping slightly.

"S-stop," she bit out through gritted teeth. She ran forward when he halted and turned around to greet her. She reached down and started tearing at the hem of her dress. "Let me stem the bleeding."

"There is no need. I am sure you are worried about my state for when nightfall comes, but the bleeding will have stopped by then. The Demons won't attack."

She hadn't even thought about that. Ignoring what he said, she continued to tear at her skirt until she had destroyed the hem and had a few long strips.

"Just... I don't know. Let me bandage your wounds?" She averted her gaze as she offered the strips of white cloth. "You're probably in pain."

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Orpheus peered at the woman as she tore strips of her dress. He'd told her he would be fine to keep the Demons at bay, so he couldn't understand her actions.

Is she, perhaps, worried for me?

Curiosity was the only reason he held out his right arm to show her the cut down his forearm that was leaking dark purple blood. He'd never had a human care for his wellbeing before, so when she started wrapping his arm over his clothing, he cocked his head at her.

Her lips were pursed while her blonde brows were knotted together. The pressure was tight as she covered him from his elbow to halfway down his arm, then tied a bow. He didn't need this, but he was sure it would aid in slowing the bleeding.

The more blood he kept, the stronger he would remain. Even he knew this. And although he would be fully healed by the next day, he didn't tell her that.

"Where else are you bleeding?" She nibbled her bottom lip as her green eyes moved over his large body like she was trying to find his wounds herself.

It would be difficult to see the purple blood seeping through his black clothing.

He would have opened his jacket and shirt, but Orpheus had no intention of showing Reia what lay beneath his clothing. Every human who had seen it had been horrified. *All of them.*

With his silence, she hesitantly stepped forward and reached out with her hand. His head was tilted further down to watch her, and she peeked up to check it was okay before placing her hand to his chest.

She started patting his body, and his abdomen clenched in pain when she eventually found a stab wound. His blood coated her palm.

He expected her to yank her hand away and stare horrified at his blood on her, but she just looked at her hand for a moment before she continued to pat him until she found the second stab wound.

“Are there anymore?” Her voice was shaky, and although he could smell the scent of fear that was always present from her, it didn’t grow stronger. Something else, a different emotion, was shaking her voice.

“No. You have already bandaged my cut.”

“Okay.” She wiped her hand on her dress, smearing purple on it, before she started tying the remaining long strips of her dress together. “You are much larger than me. I won’t be able to reach my arms behind you. Would it be okay if I walked underneath your cloak?”

“I see no problem with that.”

“Could you hold this here then?”

She placed the end of a strip next to his side, and he did what he was told before she started circling around him to walk behind him underneath his cloak. Then she came back around, making sure she covered the tail of what he was holding so it was secured, before walking around him again.

She did it a few times until between his sternum and navel was strapped before she tied it all together. Like his arm, it was tight. Already purple began to seep into it, but as he thought before, it should help stem the bleeding.

“Urm… your shoulder?”

He tilted his head so he could see the broken, jutting shaft of the arrow still lodged inside it. He crouched down while giving her his back so that she could grab the arrowhead that had torn through him completely and was visible through the other side.

He was thankful it had lodged between the gaps of his bones rather than embedding into it.

“You ran away earlier. Why would you help me now?” he asked when she was behind him.

His eyes flared red when she yanked the arrow away.

“I ran for many reasons.” She quickly ripped more of her dress and started wrapping his shoulder and the junction of his arm pit. “I won’t say I wasn’t scared of what you turned into.”

His gut tightened with tension at her words.

She is warier of me now. He’d been hoping to ease her worries, not worsen them.

He couldn’t help turning into that state. It had been because of anger and a reaction to his pain, to danger. To *her* being in danger.

Once she was finished, she stepped away and allowed him to stand and face her once more. She promptly turned her head away from him before giving him her side.

“But I wasn’t particularly pleased with the Demonslayer either. He put a sword to me!” She threw her hands up in outrage. “Why would I have stuck around and hung out with him if he did manage to kill you? You probably also would have ripped a limb from him before he did. Then he would have attracted the Demons, and I would have been killed by a swarm of them when night came.”

“Most humans are scared to be by themselves in the forest. You thought you would be safer by yourself?”

She rubbed her arm from her bicep down to her forearm.

“I wanted to become a Demonslayer if I ever got away from the village. They often hunt animals and cut them

open to bleed them in order to create traps to attract Demons so they can slay them. I knew they would draw their attention, and the more distance between me and them, the likelier I could get away. We know enough about Demons that they'd rather go after the smell of a dead human who is easy food, than to attack a human running away from it."

"That was... intelligent of you." He turned from her and started leading their path once more. He heard her footsteps follow before she came up beside him. "You wanted to become a Demonslayer?"

That was curious. None of his other offerings had wanted to become one of those hunters.

"They are supposed to be people with little fear," she answered quietly. "The more a human smells of it, the more it attracts Demons. Some believe that if you do not hold any, you can't be smelt by them at all and can remain hidden, even in the night. I've never been much of an afraid person, even when I was a child."

That wasn't true. Demons could smell a human regardless of if it was afraid or not, but yes, not having fear made it harder to.

"You smell of it," he told her. He wasn't sure if she was lying to herself, but he could tell she was afraid.

"I never said I couldn't feel it!" she yelled, making his head rear back. Her eyes widened, and she quickly cleared her throat. "What I meant to say was, yes, I know I'm afraid, but not like everyone else. I was hoping if I trained with the guild that they'd help me erase it completely."

Hmm. That is indeed an intriguing notion.

"Why did you want to become one? To protect people you care for?"

"No." Her voice was quiet as she said, "There is no one left for me to care for."

It was then that he noticed how much her teeth chattered from the cold. He looked to her bare feet to see her dress

was much shorter now and came to almost her knees.

“I just wanted to be able to travel the world freely. Killing loathsome Demons along the way would have been a bonus.” She looked to him for a moment. “I’m sure that might be the last thing you want to hear.”

“Not at all. I am not a Demon.”

She gave a short laugh as she looked away from him once more.

“I guess that’s true.” She pulled her hood more firmly over her head before she wrapped her arms around her centre and rubbed her arms as though for warmth. “What are you anyway? No one really knows.”

Orpheus wasn’t even sure what he was. There was some belief that he was part-Demon, part-human, part-*other.* Most just considered Duskwalkers as other, putting them in an unknown category. One of the many unanswered questions.

“Why do you keep looking away from me?” he asked instead of answering her. “Are you that disturbed by me now?”

He couldn’t hide the irritation in his voice. He didn’t like that she couldn’t even look upon him at all.

“With *human* blood on your face, making it obvious you’ve just eaten one? Well, yes. I find that rather creepy to look at.”

Hmm... He knew humans found the blood of their own kind disturbing. He reached down and dug his fingers into the snow to feel it munch around his glove.

“I did not finish eating him.” He started rubbing the wet powder on his face. The heat of his body melted it enough to wash the blood away. “I came to find you instead.”

“To eat me?”

“No, to find,” he corrected sharply. “It helped that I did not discover you running.”

He’d been hunting her, and he was unsure of how he would have acted if he’d had to continue chasing her. It would have made those cold numbing hands squeezing his

mind grip more forcibly. It had actually eased when he'd seen her standing there in his red hazed vision, almost as if she was waiting for him.

Part of him wanted to eat her, the desire to eat humans ever present inside him, but another part of him had wanted to find and protect her.

"Standing still had actually helped?"

"Yes." He most likely would have clawed into her upon her capture and spilled her blood. Hunger and thirst would've pierced him, and he would have truly ended her.

He finally turned his head towards her when he was finished cleaning his skull. "There, is that better?"

She peeked at him slowly before she turned her face to him completely. "Much better."

His eyes wandered over her shivering form as they continued to walk at the slowed pace he'd set.

"You are cold. I cannot carry you on my right arm currently, but I'm sure I could hold you with my left."

He offered his arm out to her.

She scrunched her nose, making the bridge crinkle as her gaze took on a concerned hint. "But you're hurt."

"You weigh nothing to me. You will not tire me any quicker than my wounds."

"Well… I guess it *would* be warmer."

"Come, little human." He gestured his hand out to present more of his left arm for her. "Let me melt your heart."

His vision took on a purple hue, his eyes turning to that colour, when pink began to rise in the arch bones of her cheeks accompanied by the tiniest peek of a smile. It was the first one he'd seen from her soft looking lips, and it caused heat to swirl in his gut and steal his pain from him completely.

It was a strange reaction from him, a foolish one, but it caused his insides to sing when she willingly stepped over to that side of him and sat upon the crook of his elbow that he lowered for her. He curled his arm around her, spanning

his hand around her side completely, as he hoisted her up into the air and away from the snow.

She came to me. Even after he'd changed into his most monstrous form in front of her. *Perhaps there is a chance of hope after all.*

He took a few quick sniffs of her chest where he'd licked away the herbs and oils that had been bathing her natural smell, causing her to make this strange squeaking noise.

Elderberries and red *roses* – each coloured rose had their own specific scent. Their meanings didn't escape his notice, and Orpheus huffed before taking his snout away from her flesh, feeling a ripple of satisfaction ruffle through him.

Her smell is pleasant to me. And she didn't smell of honey or cream or of food, which was also a good thing.

Reia was curled up in his arms again as he cradled her. Night had fallen, and he'd offered to carry her like this now despite his wounds.

His pace was brisk once more.

The idea of being surrounded by delectable heat and away from the potential of being swiped by a Demon in the trees was the only reason she'd agreed.

His warmth and strong forestry scent enveloped her, which was both relaxing and soothing. *I can't believe he smells so nice.* Other than the metallic tang of his own blood, which smelt sharper than any other she'd smelled, she couldn't help being drawn to it.

In some ways, she wished he'd smelt of rot and decay. She wouldn't have been so relaxed within his arms. It would have reminded her constantly that he was disgusting, and she shouldn't think of him as anything other than a nightmarish creature.

He is not your friend, Reia.

Despite him saying that he was intending to protect her life, she couldn't trust him. No matter if he was being kind to her, no matter if he wasn't completely unpleasant to be around, she had to remember, always, that he wasn't to be trusted. Her plan to flee had failed, but she would find another way to be free.

Since she'd been curious, she'd already asked about why he no longer had his black wolves following him. He'd explained that since he'd stopped concentrating on them, they'd disappeared. In order to get them back, he'd have to do the spell again that required him hunting down another wolf to trade its life force, destroying it, for the illusion enchantment.

Apparently, they acted as deterrent to both Demons and humans. If they thought he wasn't alone, it would be less likely that he would be attacked even though he'd arrogantly told her that attacking him was pointless.

After what she'd seen earlier, she couldn't say he was wrong or that his arrogance was unfounded.

But Reia had many questions, and she wasn't sure where to start. He also hadn't answered quite a few, blatantly and deliberately avoiding them.

"Why did you pick me over Clove?" Reia asked while pressing the back of her skull into the firm flesh of his arm to look up to him. "It was obvious she was more willing to go with you."

"Because of your anger. You had greeted me, so I thought you had made the choice, but it was your anger that had intrigued me. She also reeked of fear when I approached her, whereas you had not."

“I was pretty angry with you when you grabbed my throat, but I was surprised that it didn’t hurt.”

“You were angry before that.” She pursed her lips together in annoyance; she hadn’t thought it was so obvious before that. “I did not intend you harm. I had just wanted to see you better.”

“You chose me as your bride because I was angry and not as afraid?”

“You are *not* my bride,” he said sharply, his head turning down and twisting enough to look at her. Even though there was a hint of anger in his voice, his eyes turned a deeper well of blue.

She sucked in a gasp of surprise before frustration bubbled inside her like a corrosive pond in her gut.

“Then why the hell did they put me in a wedding dress?!”

She’d felt ridiculous in it from the moment the Priestess put it over her.

“In order to become my bride, you must gift me something. No human ever has, and I am beginning to doubt they ever will. You will be no different.”

“You’re actually seeking a bride, though?”

His answer was slow to come, but he eventually said, *“Yes.”* The word was spoken as though it was sticky and unimaginably hard to say with a grated voice.

That was something she was also curious about. He didn’t open his snout to speak, and yet they were able to have a conversation and his voice held *emotions* in it.

His head turned up to look where he was going at the same time she lowered her own to stare at her clasped hands. She was holding her cloak closed to help keep the chilly night air out.

“What must be gifted?”

“No human has ever been comforted by the answer.” She looked up just in time to see the glow of his eyes illuminating just his wolfish skull turn an even deeper blue. “I merely seek a companion now.”

All he seeks is a companion? She blinked up at him as her brows creased together so tightly she felt the pressure radiating through her forehead. *He is truly lonely?*

How could knowing that send a wave of pity through her for him? Reia had been alone all her life, she understood his pain, but she'd accepted her fate and lived with it without feeling desolate and lonely. She no longer cared to have a friend. All she wanted was freedom and to avoid the cruelty of being outcasted and shunned as a harbinger of bad omens.

She wanted to walk through a town and be able to speak to someone without their face paling in fright. She just wanted someone to look her in the eyes, to know that she was truly real and valid. Beyond that, she didn't care.

So how did this creature, monster, nightmare, have more human loneliness within it than she did? *Is it because I haven't been alone as long as he has?* She wondered if perhaps she'd feel the same way after living hundreds of years – since it was believed he'd lived that long.

He wasn't human so she didn't understand why he'd feel this way at all. Emotions were for people. He shouldn't have the capabilities to feel anything other than the deep thirst for human blood and flesh, like the Demons he closely resembled.

"What has happened to the other humans you have taken?"

His chest expanded like he was taking in a deep breath as it pushed against her side, before she watched the fogging puff of it snorting past his snout through the bony nose hole like a sigh.

"Many things." He clutched her slightly tighter, not painfully, but enough to squish her a little. "Many have fled and died. Many have been taken."

"And the others?" she asked in a small voice, unsure if she truly wanted the answer.

"They have granted me a little more humanity each time."

“That is not a proper answer. *How* did they grant you humanity?”

His hold loosened as he gave a small sigh, his jaws parting just a fraction to allow the sound of it to echo through. It was the first time other than when he’d morphed that she’d seen it open at all. It promptly shut.

“In the same way Demons are granted a little more humanity.”

Yep. Her stomach crawled while her insides twisted in understanding and uncertainty. *He’s truly eaten them... Will that be my fate too?*

She couldn’t let it be.

Learning that eating a human gave both Duskwalkers and Demons more humanity was new to her. She hadn’t known that, but it explained why he was so intelligent and seemed to have many emotions. *He must have eaten many.*

“What must be gifted to you in order to become your bride?” she asked again, wanting to know to make sure she *never* gave it to him. When he didn’t answer even after a long time and silence bleeding between them, she squinted her eyes. *I wonder if saying it will work again.* “Orpheus?”

Her eyes flung open wide when she felt his body ripple like wave similar to how she’d seen short-haired dogs shake water from their bodies in a torrent.

Saying his name gives him that much of reaction?!

“You must offer your soul for me to keep,” he said hastily.

Tension shot through her so powerfully that she felt everything within her stiffen. *Okay. I would definitely never do that!*

“I once thought the bargain of eternal life as long as I live would be enough, but no human has ever wanted to be bound to me.”

Yeah, well... the idea of being bound to a monster forever sounded hellish.

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It was only the following day that Reia found herself staring down into the forestry canyon of the Veil. It was usually a four day walk, but his long strides had brought that down to three. The drawn sketches of it she'd seen did little to capture the truly eerie and unsettling way it appeared.

Still cradled in the Duskwalker's arms since she'd only woken recently, she peered over the unnerving scene.

A black smog truly circled the entire greyish looking forest that spanned as far and as wide as the eye could see, going on for miles and miles that she couldn't see the cliff walls on the other side. The Veil apparently spanned one fourth of the entire continent and was situated in the very middle of its lands.

The smog pressed heavily against the cliff walls and flittered between the spaces of the trees before wafting higher in certain places.

The cliff edges of the canyon surrounding the Veil's forest casted shadows over it in wide arcs, making it appear even gloomier than it really needed to be.

Despite the trees appearing lush and healthy from what she could see, the stench of rot, like decaying bodies, invaded her nostrils. Pungent and strong, it curled her insides and made her wish she hadn't eaten her breakfast of

stale bread and a bruised apple. Her stomach churned the longer they stood right on the rim of the cliff and dared her to start heaving.

Reia covered her mouth and nose with her hand to poorly shield her senses from it.

“I don’t think I can go in there. That is the worst smell I have ever experienced.”

And he wanted to *take* her inside it? She could only imagine how much worse it would be at the bottom.

“I’ve always found the border quite foul,” he said, snorting a huff through his snout before shaking his head which made a light rattling sound she’d often heard from Demons. “However, it is only on the border that it is present. Once we are inside, you will no longer smell it.”

“Is that a lie?” It had to be a lie just to make her compliant about going down there; not that she wanted to go into the Veil at all!

The smell may be putrid, but something fouler was present. Dread. Not from within her, but from within *it*. She could sense dread, like the emotion was something tangible. It told her, begged her, not to come closer.

And, as Orpheus began to walk along the edge of the cliff before finding an area where he could walk down it like rocky steps, the dread called for her to run. To flee. To turn back before it was too late.

She would have squirmed to flee if it wasn’t for the fact that on one side of them was a cliff wall his shoulder was clearly scraping against, and the other side was a drop so deadly she knew she would have run out of oxygen screaming before hitting the ground.

He was even turned slightly and walking with one shoulder forward, proving just how little room he had to walk down this natural decline.

The stench began to invade her nostrils and throat like acid, burning into her sinuses almost painfully. It singed the inside of her lungs and felt as though she was suffocating.

Gasping for air, she clutched at his jacket.

“Please,” she strangled out. “Take me back.”

It was too much. Reia couldn’t handle it as tears began to collect on her lashes.

His cloak fell over her head as he dipped his body to allow it to fall forward.

“Some of the others I have brought here have told me I do not smell particularly unpleasant, like mud and bark. This should help.”

She clutched the hem of his cloak opening and curled it around her face completely to shield her in his soothing scent. *They have said he smells of mud?* She couldn’t smell dirt, but she managed to take in a proper breath through the material.

It must have been at least an hour before his walking position changed, and the sunlight glittering through his cloak faded into a dull shadow.

“You must walk from here,” he told her while moving her until she was forced to place her bare feet on the ground. “And you must remain inside my cloak until we have returned to my home.”

She desperately clung to it to protect her face from the horrible smell as he started to pull it away from her by force. His strength won out and she took a gasping breath of unfiltered air. She huffed, choking... until she realised it wasn’t necessary.

He’d been telling the truth. She could no longer smell the decay of rotting flesh.

She turned her head up to him with a frown, a pout slipping from her lips.

“See?” He lifted the side of his cloak to create a space at his side for her. “Most of you are not fond of this part, but come, quickly, before the Demons pick up the human in your scent.”

I’m in the Veil. The home of Demons and the place they came from. It must be crawling with hundreds, *thousands,*

of them.

Nothing else could have made her jump into action quicker than those words, and she tucked herself into his side. His arm came over her shoulder, his large hand spanning her hip, before the cloak fell over her completely and darkness covered her vision.

She attempted to open it so she could see, but he swiftly used his other hand to pull it tight over her.

“Like I mentioned, most of you are not fond of this part, and it is because you will not be able to see where you are going.”

His body and hand kept her firmly against him as he started to blindly steer her.

“Is this so I don’t know the way back?” She tried to take careful steps and knew he was walking slower than normal to make sure she didn’t trip or fall.

“No. It is so that I have masked your scent completely. Even just a finger out can attract the Demons to us.”

Reia gulped. Fair enough, she would walk blind if she had to. However, she tried to figure out how she was supposed to run from this place if she couldn’t be outside his cloak.

Isn’t it dangerous to bring me here then? What was going to happen to Reia when she arrived at his home? She worried she’d truly be trapped there or stuck inside it forever. *Will I never see the sun again?* She clenched her hands into tight fists. *No, it’s okay. Everything will be fine.*

As they walked, there was something she noticed. Something that took a long time to catch her attention as her thoughts ran rampant through her mind.

“There isn’t any snow here,” she commented.

Although the ground felt freezing cold, her feet weren’t sinking into snow. She vaguely felt grass, sticks, and stones beneath her bare feet.

“The Veil is warmer in the winter than above the surface as the walls protect it from the cold.” She could hardly call this warmer since it was still rather chilly, but at least it

wasn’t threatening to give her frostbite. “And the summer is cool as the shade keeps out the heat.”

Just as she opened her lips to say something, his hand came up to cover her mouth. Actually, it was so large in comparison to her that it horrifyingly covered her entire face. Her hands shot up to clasp his wrist.

She stamped her feet as she tried to pull it away. She could breathe, but she definitely wasn’t comfortable with him doing this! He continued to walk her despite her struggles.

“What have you got, Mavka?”

Ice ran through her veins at the voice that came from *outside* of the cloak. She stopped struggling, stopped breathing, when she realised they weren’t alone.

“You are returning from a hunt, Mavka. Does that mean you have brought us something tasty to devour? A wolf, a deer, or a human, perhaps?”

Oh, fuck. Is that a Demon talking? She didn’t know they could speak as well!

Reia could hear the brushing of leaves as something heavy scraped its claws over branches at it walked next to them in the trees.

“What I have is of no concern to you.” A soft growl began to rumble right next to her ear from Orpheus’ chest. “Come any closer and it will be you that is eaten.”

“No fun,” it snickered, its voice a mingle of feminine and masculine while it also sounded raspy, as though it wasn’t used to speaking. “I only wish to play with it. I cannot smell it, but I know you must have something if you are returning. I can hear it breathing. Come, give us a bite. Surely you can’t eat it all.”

Reia was swayed in the air as he held her firmly while his body lunged forward, like he’d reached out suddenly with his arm. The Demon yelped, before she vaguely heard the sound of a thump against the ground.

It hissed before quick fading stomps told her it was fleeing.

Not being able to witness whatever had happened did little to ease her heart's rapid beat. She was thankful that she'd hadn't seen it and his scent surrounding her had stopped her from smelling it.

"Border dwellers. They aren't the most dangerous, but they are generally the ones who hunt you humans above the surface."

He slowly lifted his hand away from her face to place it against her side once more. Reia said nothing, no longer wishing to speak in case something heard her.

Silence remained between them as they walked for what must have been hours. Every rustle of leaves caught her attention, every snapping of a twig in the distance, every scrape of *something* against rock or bark. She could hear the rattling of bones, creepy howling in the distance, and the harrowing squawks of a what sounded like the mixture between a bird and a wailing child.

Reia was alert.

If something happens, just run back the way we came. She thought she could at least do that. She just hoped they weren't on a winding path and she ended up running further into the Veil rather than the edge of it.

Although she knew it must be daytime still, all she could see was black. There was so little sunlight reaching the ground within the Veil that it didn't glitter through the fabric of his cloak anymore. All she saw was darkness. Just swallowing darkness.

No, it wasn't darkness. It had to have been dark grey. Because, before long, the sun began to set, and she truly understood what it was like to look into the void of nothingness.

"Watch your step," Orpheus told her when he deliberately slowed.

The toes of her left foot knocked against something hard. Her big toe grazed against it as she felt over what was at her feet, feeling the sharp edge of a step. She tentatively placed her foot on it and an emotion tore through her heart.

Are we here? They had been walking for almost an entire day. Reia understood she was truly deep within the Veil, was surrounded by it, trapped inside with Demons all around her.

A part of her had been hoping that something would happen so she wouldn't make it here. That she would have had the chance to run again. But she knew all hope of truly surviving would have been at the edge of this place, not inside it.

Her right foot bumped into another step, and then there was a third before her feet were on a flat and wide area. The roughness of the ground informed her that she must be standing on timber planks. He steered her a few steps forward before halting.

"Reia," he said, startling her. He'd never said her name to her before, and the way he'd said it had been filled with a certain kind of gentleness. "Would you mind covering your ears?"

She nodded as she moved her hands up to cover her ears just as she heard creaking like a door was slowly being opened. His hand on her side tightened and held her firmly.

Her hands did little to block out the bone-chilling beastly roar that came from him. She flinched before clenching her eyes shut. The following sounds were dulled as she heard creatures with sharp claws scuttling away as they made shrieking, crying whines.

One ran over a surface directly above her, before a small thud against the ground from behind told her it jumped over them.

Orpheus pushed her forward with a hesitant slowness, and she lowered her hands to hear him sniffing quickly. He gave a snorting huff before she heard a door close behind her.

The rustling of the cloak being pulled from away filled her senses, but it did nothing to take away the darkness that had been blacking her eyes. His heavy footsteps stomped echoes as he drew away from her.

All she could see were two glowing blue orbs in the darkness. They slightly highlighted the white bone around his eye sockets.

A match was stuck, giving a flicker of light, before a candle was lit. He began to move around, lighting candle after a candle until she began to get an impression of her surroundings.

A table that seemed gigantic in comparison to her lit up first. It had an array of different herbs on top of it, as well as a cutting board, a mortar and pestle, and strange ornaments that she wouldn’t be able to decipher until she looked at them up close.

Then, a long windowsill with a wash basin in front of it was illuminated. In pots sitting on the sill, vine-like herbs dangled down over a counter and into the crudely made metal basin. There were glass bottles of purple, yellow, and even dull red filled with unknown liquids resting against the walls on the counter.

Everything got bright when he moved behind her, and she turned around to find he was lighting a chandelier made of deer antlers that had candles fitted into it. Glittering trinkets hung from it by strings with some dangling lower than others. Some had crystals, others rocks and bones.

There were two chairs with armrests that were covered in so many different animal hides that they looked quite soft, as well as bulky. Between them was a small round table with another candle that he lit, while in front of them was a fireplace and chimney.

She wiggled her toes when she realised there was something soft and ticklish beneath her feet and found herself standing on fur. Her eyes didn’t stay downturned,

however, as she once more marvelled at what she was standing in.

It looks like a log-cabin. The walls were made of thigh-sized, thick logs that had been neatly carved to all look the same diameter. The timber was distressed and old looking. She knew a second layer must be on the outside because there was not a single gap between them, and she couldn't feel a single drift of air.

"This is your home?" she asked, her bottom lip falling in disbelief.

But she knew it had to be his home by the single fact that the air smelt like timber, fur, and, most importantly, his smoky mahogany and pine scent.

He answered her with a grunt and a singular nod.

"How did this come to be here?" This was not what Reia was expecting.

I thought he would take me to a cave. Like, like... some kind of barbaric animal! But this was a house, an actual *home.*

With furniture, and candles, and warmth. It looked cosy despite the fact that she could see that many of those trinkets appeared to be bones and small animal skulls.

The room she was standing in was like a large living room and kitchen area. There was a darkness present down an unlit hallway that held a door on one side whereas the other had two.

The ceiling was tall enough that it allowed him freedom to move around with his massive height and the Impala antelope horns that made him even taller. He did have to duck slightly under the chandelier, but not by much, only to make sure his horns didn't knock into it.

"It was built a very long time ago," he answered, walking around her and then the long table with two chairs around it – one that appeared to fit him and another that was much smaller – to walk to the counter where she saw a cooking hearth on the opposite side of the basin.

The table came to his hip height, which just so happened to be at her bottom ribcage. Being in this room, with everything that was designed to allow for his weight and mass, Reia felt undoubtably small.

She'd felt small sitting in the crook of his elbow or being cradled in his arms, but with the light and this room, it made her realise just how large he was.

He had to be at least seven feet and two inches tall from foot to skull, his horns reaching at least seven feet and nine inches, and even though Reia wasn't short, a strong five feet and six inches for a human woman, he was still a giant. He was also wide, a wall of flesh and muscle.

He opened one of the many cupboards above the counter next to the wide window to pull out four dill herb bundles wrapped in white ribbons with jingle bells and red berries. There was also a bone, like a rat femur, dangling down horizontally by a string.

"Stay inside, I will return momentarily," he told her as strode towards the front door. Like he knew she'd ask, he added, "My protection enchantments are no longer in place as they only last a few days. I must replace them."

He promptly left, leaving Reia by herself to take in his home while she was alone.

She brushed her fingertips over the long table before making her way over to the counter to see what other items he had lying around. There was a second stone mortar and pestle that was already filled with crushed herbs and spices.

The chiming of the jingle bells told her he was right next to the window at the front of the house, near where she was standing. His footsteps began to thump to the other side of the house as she picked up a yellow glass bottle and opened it, daring to sniff its contents.

A noise of surprise came from her nose at the strange, but sweet, smell. She placed it back down to open a wooden container to find a dry black powder inside it. When she

sniffed it, she sneezed. It wasn't terrible, but it tingled her nose.

She touched the healthy vine-like plants with three leaves sprouting from its vines in different sections. *I'm surprised anything like this can live in the Veil.* The trees she understood, but this seemed far more delicate.

She moved to the table to figure out what the ornaments were. They looked like driftwood with clumps of silver ore growing from it like moss.

Just as she was about to take a closer look, something glinting in her peripheral from the other side of the table caught her attention. Reia leaned over, having to partially jump to reach the centre of the table, and grabbed a hold of something cold.

A dagger. And she could see there was more than one. *He left me alone with weapons?* That was rather foolish of him.

The handle was a swirl shape with black leather rope in the indents for comfort as she curled her fist around it tightly. She tapped her forefinger of her other hand on the tapered point, finding the double-edged blade was sharp, but she made sure not to prick her finger.

A large, clawed hand covered in a black glove wrapping around her hand holding the handle made her yelp in surprise.

She'd been so engrossed in the weapon, in the possibility of perhaps using it to free herself, that she hadn't heard him come back inside and walk up behind her.

She could feel the warmth of his body pressing against her back as he leaned over her while eerily bringing his snout down next to her head.

"Unless you know the one place to stab on my body and strike deep enough, I should forewarn you that if you fail, it will result in your unfortunate death."

She attempted to pull out of his grasp, but he refused to release her and forced her to remain gripping the dagger.

"I wasn't thinking that."

A complete lie.

“Understand that many offerings have said those words to me before they tried. I do not like pain, and it is certain to invoke an uncontrollable rage in me – as you have already seen.”

“Okay, yes. I got it,” she muttered sharply as she yanked her hand harder. “Now let me go.”

He released her, and her hand stabbed into the air before she tossed the dagger onto the table. It clanked as it bounced over the surface of it. Reia swiftly turned around and faced him with a glare, but he’d already begun to walk away from her.

He reached up and undid the tie of his cloak from his neck before he pulled it forward to slip his horns through the holes to remove it. He placed it over the backrest of the chair at the dining table, and she sucked her lips into her mouth to bite them closed.

The cloak had done much to hide the bulkiness of his body. Although he was rather slim, she could see that strong muscles were pressing against his clothing, as biceps and thighs could be seen flexing as he moved around the room.

She also finally saw his head completely as a whole. Although the front of his bony face was wolfish with sharp looking fangs, the back appeared more deer-like as it supported those heavy looking horns that spun and twirled up and back from his skull.

“I will light the rest of the house, then you must take a warm bath to remove your human scent from your skin,” he told her when he picked up the candle he’d used earlier to light the living area. “We must do it before it seeps through the walls and alerts the Demons close by that I have brought another human here. If you are hungry, I will give you food after unless you wish to rest first.”

A relaxing bath, food, and then sleep, sounded exactly what she needed. They’d been travelling for days, and Reia

was exhausted. She could figure out plans and ideas later once she was more familiar with her environment.

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A nice, warm, relaxing bath had *not* been in Reia's future.

She'd watched with awe after he led her into the furthest room in the house. He made his way to the wooden tub, then sliced at his wrist with his thumb claw to produce a few drops of blood. With a small incantation, the few drops of purple began to glow before turning clear, filling the tub with steaming water!

The washroom was small, only allowing for the tub and a waste bucket with a lid that didn't appear to have ever been used by him. The wooden tub was big enough that she thought *he'd* be able to fit inside it with a generous amount of room to move.

Herbs were burning, creating an inviting air, as candles highlighted not only the many plants that surrounded the walls, but large crystals as well. Some of those purple crystals even came to her hip height.

When she'd asked why the room was styled this way, the Duskwalker informed her that he'd attempted to create a relaxing environment for the humans he brought here.

Well, bang up job, buddy.

It was definitely bewitching and calming.

She hadn't realized it was done on purpose to elude the horrible truth!

She had thought all would be well when he stepped out after the tub was filled, giving her privacy so she could strip and hop inside it. However, he'd returned shortly after she'd begun to go limp in the heated water carrying something in his large hand.

And that had been the start of her struggles. He poured a few drops of something into the water and then knelt behind her.

He'd told her to relax as he dipped his hand into some kind of oil and started smearing it over her skin.

When she tried to scramble forward and away, completely averse to the idea of him touching her naked body, he wrapped his other arm around her shoulders to keep her in place.

"I can do it myself!" Reia yelled, wriggling in the water as he tried to run a soapy, oiled, gloved hand over her shoulder. Reia thrashed in the water, her face flaring red in anger and embarrassment.

"No. It must be done by me," he told her sternly, rubbing his hand down her arm all the way down to her elbow.

"Let me go!" she yelled.

She wriggled to get free as best as she could while she covered her breasts with one arm and tried to shield her hips and the apex between her thighs with the other.

Water splashed and sloshed with the strength of her movements as her wet hair slapped against her. The water spilt over the rim of the tub. Thrashing. Fighting.

A curt growl sounded from him before his other arm wrapped around her neck, his hand cupping the back of her head before his fingers came around the other side to rest against the side of her face. The point of his claws dug into the skin right below her eye, next to her nose, and the side of her lip.

"Settle, little human." He huffed, and she could see from the corner of her eye that the glow of his orbs had turned bright red. "You must understand that only prey squirms. It

squirms when it’s fighting for its last breath, to live, and it entices the *predator* in me to destroy, to *eat*.”

Reia stilled. The only thing moving was her heaving chest as she tried to catch the breath she’d lost from trying to flee. Her heart was racing, thumping heavily in her chest, and she noticed his arms tightened on her – almost as if he could hear it or feel it.

“Please calm yourself.” His voice was raspy and tight as though he was straining against himself. “We have made it this far. I have managed to bring you here safely. Let this not be the end.”

“I-I can wash myself,” she told him, almost begging.

Her eyes fell onto the all the crystals and plants, understanding he’d tried to make this room relaxing because he’d be unsettling it.

“I am sure you can.” He started to loosen his hold on her, slowly withdrawing his arms when he knew she wouldn’t move. “However, in order for the soap to hide the human in your scent, I have to administer it by my own hand to allow the magic to work into it.”

Her eyes bowed in understanding, even though it did little to ease her. *The Priestess had to wash me by hand too.* She’d said the same thing about the soap she’d washed her in before dressing her in a wedding dress. It had been to hide the smell of fear behind a strong perfume, so she’d be safe to travel.

He brought his hand in front of her face and held it there so she could see it.

“I have worn my gloves as not to touch you directly since I’ve already come to learn that you humans do not like this, but it is something I must do, and it must be done every day.” He lowered his hand, tilting to the side to reach into what she saw was a pot of the oil he was using to coat her with. “Otherwise, Demons will descend upon my home and lie in wait, doing everything in their power to frighten you. If they succeed, you will not be safe from them… nor myself.”

Demons prefer their food to be filled with terror and fear. Would he be the same? Would it stir hunger in Orpheus like it did them?

“O-okay,” she conceded, her shoulders slumping as she lowered her head.

Why am I even concerned anyway? Just because he was obviously a male, at least she believed so considering the deepness of his voice and the shape of his body, she doubted he had any primal urges like desire.

He once more began to rub the oil soap on her skin, starting from her shoulder and working his way down her arm. He was careful, his touch light, as he worked his finger pads through the gaps of her fingers and even cleaned her nails.

“I will have to do this morning and night since I use gloves. They prevent the strength of my essence from absorbing into your skin. So, in the future, once you are more comfortable, it would be better if you permit me to not use them.”

Reia swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded that she understood. He cleaned her neck, her jaw, face, even the creases in her ears, before he began to work down the other arm. He even washed her hair.

Her hands clenched as she brought her lips into her mouth to bite them shut of any noise of stress, trying her hardest to stay stiff as a board when he started to wash her chest with both hands. Her face heated, even her ears feeling hot, when she felt her nipples budding despite her nervousness.

It’s fine. He’s not doing this to be perverted. She chanted to herself, ignoring the strange pleasurable twinge that shot through her when his gloves ran over them. *I doubt he even has a cock... Or does he?* Her face grew even hotter at that thought, especially when his hands started drifting lower.

The roughness of them caused her body to twitch when he delved them between the lips of her folds. Even though his touch was perfunctory and dispassionate, her body still

reacted to the foreign caress. Her legs muscles tightened in tension and the apex of her clit sent out a throb when his hand moved through the slit of her body to even clean between the cleft of her arse cheeks.

To turn away from her body's traitorous reaction to being touched so intimately, she said, "You never told me why it is you can use magic."

"Like I said, no human has been comforted by the answer."

Reia gave a huff of annoyance before swiping a trailing water drop from her face.

"Look, you can tip toe around the whole eating people thing, but it's kind of fucking obvious." His eyes flashed red as his head snapped to her. She tilted her chin up at him defiantly. He hadn't seemed to like her angry tone or her swearing. "And I'm still sitting here like a good girl letting you wash me. I also agreed to your bargain and fulfilled my end of it."

He took in a large, chest expanding breath, before he snorted out a sigh. His orbs faded back to blue once more.

"I didn't start out with ability to," he said as he started to clean her back. "I came across a group of, what you would call, Priests and Priestesses once in my travels. I had already been hunting for an animal to eat. They were at the wrong place at the wrong time, and I ended up devouring them." His jaw opened and closed slightly as his tongue clicked inside his mouth. "Their magic tasted foul to consume. However, it granted me the use of it, and I have been thankful ever since. It has allowed me to protect my offerings better."

He moved down the side of the tub to wash her legs, starting with her thighs.

Somehow, his truthful words didn't send fear or dread through her. She had a feeling she was already becoming accustomed to the idea of the violence in his past.

I still don't want to be on the receiving end of it, though.

Reia squirmed a little as a small, strained laugh ripped from her when his hands tickled her feet as he cleaned them. He even went between her toes.

“Ah, yes,” he said when he drew the pointed tip of his claw underneath her foot. “Most of you humans are ticklish here.”

Reia let out a squeal and kicked her leg out in reaction.

Orpheus *chuckled,* before releasing her foot to clean the other.

Lying on her side, since her body had tried to roll over to get away from him purposefully tickling her, she stared at the wall of the tub with her eyes opened wide and full.

Did... did he just laugh? Her gaze fell to him at the side of the tub in shock. She didn’t know he had the capabilities to laugh, and it had been delectable and charming with the depth of his rich voice.

Once he was finished washing her foot, he curled his finger as he held her firm around her ankle, presenting his black sharp claw once more.

“Should I do it again?”

“N-no!” she yelled, desperately trying to yank her foot away from him.

He brought it closer, almost an inch away, and she laughed with panic.

“Pfft,” he snorted, another chuckle falling from him as he pulled away and released her. “You humans are so peculiar. It appears as though it tickles you, and yet you laugh... even when I haven’t started yet. I have never understood it.”

She couldn’t believe it. He... he was teasing her!

Reia was lying naked in a tub after he’d just hand washed her himself, feeling spikes of unwelcome jolts of pleasure, and now this *monster* was teasing her.

She covered her burning face with her hands. *This is so strange.* This wasn’t what she was expecting at all when she came here.

He eats people. And yet, Reia could feel the stir of humour in her chest wanting to share in his laughter, because even she knew how humans reacted to being tickled was odd. It was torture, she couldn't think of anything worse – other than pain – but it would make her giggle regardless.

"I have completed the spell." Orpheus stood, towering over her before making his way to the door. "There is a cloth for you to dry yourself with. Once you are done, call out, and I will show you to your room."

When he was gone, Reia lowered herself until her lips were under the surface of the water and blew bubbles of annoyance. She allowed the remaining heat to soak into her tired muscles and let her head fall limp as she rested.

I'm hungry and tired. As much as she wanted to stay here, she worried she'd fall asleep in the tub at this rate.

She sat up and sniffed her arms to find no smell on them. She knew he'd lathered her in something, but she couldn't find any hint of what it might have been.

Then she got out, wrapping herself in a large sheet that she figured would make do for a towel. She doubted he had the capabilities to make one. Once she'd hidden her nudity, not that it mattered since he'd seen and touched all of her, she called out to him.

He led her down the hallway to the room directly next to the bathing one. The hallway wasn't in the centre of the house. The bathing room and the one she figured was going to be hers shared the same side of the hall. They seemed to be narrower than the other side where there was a singular door.

That must be where he sleeps. He would need much more room than her considering his size. *I wonder if he sleeps on a nest.* She wasn't interested in finding out.

He opened the door for her and ushered her forward with his hand.

"Are you hungry? I am not good with cooking human food, that is something you will have to do for yourself, but I'll

bring you something you can eat now.”

Reia nodded, and he left her alone once more.

She walked inside the room while closing the door behind her and took it in. There wasn’t much. It was small, longer than it was wide, and there was a place she thought once must have had a window but was now boarded up. The only furniture was a small wooden bed that appeared old and worn as well as side table and a closet.

Because there wasn’t a lot of room, the bed was pressed against the wall shared with the hallway. Three candles had already been lit on the square side table, and Reia walked over to the closet to see what was inside.

Disturbingly, it was filled with white dresses similar to the one she’d worn here. There were no other colours, no pants, shirts, or skirts. Just wedding dresses.

It was off-putting going through them, wishing there was something other than a bride’s dress to wear, but she’d rather not be naked. She picked a simple one that was so plain it didn’t have any lace or sewn designs at all and decided to make it a sleeping gown for herself.

It appeared someone else already had that thought, because it had been cut to be shorter and more comfortable as not to get tangled in their legs while they slept.

Just how many people have died coming here?

Reia couldn’t linger on that thought. That was the past, and they shouldn’t matter to her. They were already dead anyway. All that mattered was her own survival.

She slipped it on with just enough time before he opened the door and laid a wooden bowl on the end of her bed. It was filled with a handful of strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and hazelnuts.

“Fruit?” she asked with a hint of curiosity.

She picked up one of the strawberries and took a bite into it, surprised to find it was deliciously sweet.

“I have a garden where I’ve learned to tend easy to grow human food. It’s not much, but I understand you humans

must eat regularly. I have maintained it over the eons.” He tilted his head when she frowned at him with her lips pressing together. “Why is it you appear confused?”

“This is all a lot to take in. I wasn’t expecting a house, nor fresh food like this. I was expecting when you said food that you’d throw a slab of meat at me or something. I just...” Reia rubbed her cheeks, weariness making her eyes heavy. “Never mind. Thank you for the food. I’m tired. I would like to sleep.”

He tilted his head the other way, before nodding.

Reia didn’t know how late it was, and even though the bedding smelt musky and dusty, she crawled into it. It was firm, but still softer than her own bed made of hay and straw, and her blanket was actually animal furs that had been sewn together.

Her heart felt heavy in her chest as she curled into a ball, wary about closing her eyes, but allowing sleep to take her regardless.

Orpheus was disturbed from his slumber with his vision going from black to bright blue in an instant before it settled to its usual soft glow. He’d been startled awake by the tiniest footsteps, the obvious creep of a tiptoe, moving across the floor in front of the door of his sleeping room.

She has awoken. Without moving his head from its laid down position as he lay flat on his stomach, his gaze turned to his window.

It was late morning, and he was still so tired since he'd not slept once on their journey. Even though they'd both slept for what must have been unusually long, he barely felt rested.

After checking on her after a short while to find she was truly asleep, Orpheus had felt comfortable enough to seek his own sleep and recovery. Even though he was nocturnal, like Demons, he would now begin to force himself to sleep late into the night while in the future he would attempt to force his human, Reia, to do same. Hopefully their sleeping patterns could align, both compromising until they slept through dawn and most of the morning.

He sighed when he continued to hear the slow creep of just the pads of a human's toes touching the ground. She was sneaking around his home. *What is she up to?*

Forcing himself to his hands and knees, Orpheus rose, scratching at his back and chest, itching due to sleeping in the constriction of his clothing. He didn't mind the pants too much, but he always found it uncomfortable to sleep in his button-down shirt.

He would have to endure since he couldn't show Reia his body. She would most likely panic, like many others had. He'd learnt a long time ago that his flesh distressed the humans.

Quietly, he placed his boots on and left his room, not bothering to grab his jacket, to make his way to the living area.

The woman was at the door, trying her hardest to be silent as she yanked on the handle only to find it locked. Of course, he'd locked it. He couldn't have her going outside by herself.

Coming up behind her, he placed his hand on the corner of the door to keep it in place and stop it from rattling at her attempts of opening it.

"Do you wish to die?" He almost sighed at her in irritation.

Sometimes he wondered if the humans were stupid. They always did this, always tried to leave while they thought he was unsuspecting. *They are all the same.*

She flinched before quickly turning around to face him with her back pressed against the door and her arms behind her.

“No,” she squeaked as her eyes fell to the side, avoiding his gaze while he towered over her and looked down. “I just wanted to peek outside.”

He wondered if that was a lie.

“If you wanted to see what outside was like, you could have looked through the windows.”

He gestured to the room to point to the one in the cooking area, then the one near the fireplace.

When she turned her head back to him, he knew by the deep narrow of her eyes that she was giving him a glare. *Cute,* he thought. He found the fiery personality of this little, tiny woman, adorable.

He heard something hard scraping against the wooden door and knew she must have something in her hand. He sent his vision to the table to find one of the three daggers upon it was missing, specifically, the one in particular she’d been inspecting the previous day.

“And where were you planning to go with that?” His voice was laced with both anger and curiosity.

She’d been wise enough to grab a weapon to protect herself, although it would have done very little against a Demon.

“I just wanted to have a quick look outside, okay?” she snapped at him, refusing to bring her hands forward. “I wasn’t planning to run away or anything.” Once more, he wasn’t sure if that was a lie or not, however it *almost* sounded sincere. “I-I thought I could see the sun through the windows.”

Now *that* sounded like the truth.

He bent away from her to give her space before stepping back.

“I have something for you.” He walked away to go to his room to retrieve something precious to him.

As he was leaving, he heard footsteps before the dull sound of the dagger being placed onto the table.

When he returned, he was wearing his jacket to hide his body better and held a special piece of jewellery in his hand. He led Reia to one of the chairs in the living area covered in fur skins and got her to sit on the smaller one, although it was still large in comparison to her, before kneeling on one knee with his other foot placed against the ground.

She was complying, for whatever reason, to his wishes.

“This is a protection amulet,” he explained as he began to slip a diadem circlet tiara over her forehead. “It will help to keep you safe.”

The metal was silver in colour but was joined together at the front by swirling links and appeared delicate, as though it might be easy to unlink and destroy. Orpheus knew from experience it was very sturdy. Small, clear, sparkling diamonds were threaded through the swirling links with metal twine and adhesive.

The circling arms were straight as he pushed them underneath her hair, so it was buried inside it, before he hooked the thin chain together at the back of her head to keep it in place. A blue sapphire gem in the shape of a teardrop dangled from the V-shaped point of the circlet tiara. It tapped against her forehead just above the centre of her creased brows when she frowned after he placed it on her.

There were two pins right where the straight circling arms and the ornamental loose links fitted together on either side, and he tried his best with his large fingers not to hurt her as he pushed them through her hair to secure it in place.

“You are giving me a crown?” Her voice was laced with confusion when she reached up to touch it when he was done.

He didn’t get up, choosing to stay kneeling in front of her since she didn’t appear distressed with him caging her into the chair.

Her fear is lessening. By the day, the minute, even the second, he could already smell that scent lessening from her. Even now it was far less apparent than before he’d placed the circlet over her forehead.

It was so barely present that he actually had to lean in closer to smell it at all. And he did, not only to try to detect it, but also to greedily take in her elderberry and rose scent.

The concoction he’d layered her in the previous evening was already dull and waning, but it had never prevented him from smelling her. Since he was the wielder of the magic, it didn’t affect him, only others.

I like her smell. If she wasn’t so wary of him, which he could still see, he would have leaned forward and licked her so he could taste it.

All the humans smelt different. Some smelt like plants, others like fruit, and then there had been the few that smelt wildly unpleasant. *Hers is one of my favourites so far.*

The meanings behind her berry and flowery smell were symbolic to someone who worked with their meanings. He’d used elderberries occasionally for protection in the past, but he’d never worked with roses before.

He gave a snorting huff of enjoyment, which she must have taken as him saying yes, because she asked, “How do you have this? And why a crown at all? Wouldn’t a necklace have been easier?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t make it,” he answered truthfully. Orpheus didn’t know how to create something like this, something so delicate, pretty, and full of this kind of strange, yet strong, magic. “It was given to me.”

She fingered the teardrop sapphire, flicking it to make it sway against her forehead. “By who?”

“I don’t know that, either. I found it upon my kitchen table eons ago with a note that instructed me to give it to my humans for protection.”

He’d been angered at the time that someone had managed to sneak into his home undetected and not leave a single trace behind for him to stalk in revenge. However, he’d done as instructed with the next offering he’d brought here, and she’d survived a little longer than the others before her.

He raised a claw and tapped the V-shaped point of the metal circlet.

“I have discovered Demons refuse to touch it, and any that had were burned by it like they’d stepped into the sunlight. Strong Demons who are able to withstand the sun for a short period of time are able to touch you still, but weak ones cannot.”

It wasn’t perfect, but he doubted anything would be. The stronger the Demon, the harder it was to kill. They were still unable to hold the amulet, but Reia would be fair game, and they’d eat everything other than her head to appease their hunger.

Weaker ones would scream in agony if they tried to touch her at all.

That was enough to bring him comfort as it was generally the weak ones that loitered in this part of the Veil, besides the odd few. They were intelligent enough to stay out of his territory, and he stayed out of theirs, a sort of unspoken truce between them.

“Why are you giving me this though? Is your house not enough protection?”

“It is so that you can go outside, with my supervision, of course.”

“Wait,” she gasped as she lowered her hands, tilting her head at him which made the teardrop sway and fall to the

side. “You’re not actually going to trap me inside?”

“Although that would be for the best,” he said, leaning back so he could roll to his feet and stand. “I have learned that you humans go partially insane if you are locked inside.”

He reached his hand forward, hoping she might take it like she had once before.

“My gosh.” Her voice was high-pitched, but he felt a spark of delight when she reached her hand forward and placed it in his own so he could help her to stand. “Just how many have you brought here to know so much about us?”

“I have a sword in my room if you wish to carry it outside to make yourself feel better,” he said, instead of answering her question.

He knew the amount, but it was many. He’d been taking an offering every decade for over a hundred and eighty years. Reia was his nineteenth, and he was beginning to wonder if perhaps she could be the last.

She is not afraid of me anymore. But he didn’t know how to convince her to stay. He could sense it, knew it from her past actions and words, that she was trying to figure out a way to run – just like the others who had been similar to her.

When she was steady on her feet, she swiftly withdrew her hand, but regardless, she’d held it to begin with.

He still refused to allow hope.

“I don’t know how to wield a sword.”

“There is something I must do outside, and it will take me some time to do it. You are welcome to watch me complete this task and explore once it is done, or I can make you a tea and you can sit inside by yourself.”

Her pretty green eyes fell to the window nearest to them next to the fireplace as she began to nibble on the inside of her bottom lip. He’d noticed she did this a lot, and he was growing ever fascinated by the soft, plumpness of her lips that the action allowed him to see.

Orpheus didn’t want to grow attached to her, didn’t want to be given additional pain that losing a human gave him, but it was hard not to lose himself in her beauty.

Her blonde hair was straight and came down to her waist, but it looked like pure streaks of sunlight. He wondered if they would be as warm as they appeared, or glossy against his direct fingertips without his gloves. Her skin was pale, yet he knew it would be remarkably soft, and he wondered how much it would yield under his palms before it pained her.

The gown she was in wasn’t the one she’d chosen to sleep in, but it was white and hugged her curves. He found all humans were squishy, but she seemed softer, like he could squeeze for a lot longer before he crushed her.

She wasn’t thin, wasn’t thick, but was somewhere in the middle. It made the feminine curves that all women seemed to hold more rounded. Her hips pressing against the skirt of her dress showed their width, and her breasts were straining against the material like it was too tight for their larger size.

“I *really* would like to see outside,” she eventually grumbled, taking his attention when he realised he’d been swallowing her entire body with his gaze – not that she would’ve known since his orbs wouldn’t show this.

“It is decided, then. First, you must bathe to hide your human scent.”

Her face paled, and Orpheus felt the tickle to chuckle in his chest.

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After, once again, trying her hardest not move while he washed her with his gloves on, Reia dressed in the gown she'd put on when she got out of bed.

Part of the reason she had wanted to go outside earlier was because she'd truly thought she'd seen sunshine and wanted to know if her eyes were casting illusions. The other reason was because she'd been cuddling into her pillow when she'd awoken and realised, because she'd moved it from pressing against the wall, she had seen marks.

Inspecting them by using her thumb to brush over the carved straight lines, she immediately knew what they were.

Days. They were the carved markings to show how many days someone had been there. That was already ominous, especially since only eight days had been marked, but it was the fact that it appeared as though other people had marked into the same etchings to count their days as well.

Not just one, but a few. The deep gouges of the first three days marked that many didn't make it that long. Five was next, and it seemed only one had made it to eight.

It was creepy, and she'd felt the urge to flee.

She didn't get that far, and she didn't think she actually would have once she got outside and saw the forest, but

she’d wanted to know, needed to fully see the trees pressing her in like bars of a cage. She needed to remind herself that she was in a nightmare and that this cute cottage was nothing but deception and lies.

He’d asked her if she wanted to die, and at first, she’d thought it was a threat. Then, he’d given her the amulet tiara.

Once he explained what it did, an overwhelming amount of relief washed over her. His words had been like a blanket of safety and ease, and it was then that she knew he’d meant if she wanted to die at the hands of Demons.

Many have fled and died. Many have been taken. She’d remembered he’d said those words to her as he was kneeling in front of her while he was fixing it to her head. It finally registered that some of those marks on the walls belonged to those who hadn’t been killed by him.

Your life is precious. I will try to make sure it doesn’t end if I can. He wasn’t *intending* to hurt her, and the amulet was just further proof of that.

For the first time, she actually felt safe in his presence. Not just from the world outside, but him as well. Perhaps not truly comfortable, but safe nonetheless.

“I feel ridiculous wearing a wedding dress.” She sighed as she walked down the hallway and greeted him where he was waiting for her in the living room. He was just standing there idly with his arms limp by his sides. “I wish you had something different for me to wear.”

He tilted his head at her, which she was beginning to understand conveyed curiosity or thought.

“If you do not like any of the clothing, you are welcome to change them.”

She pulled on the skirt of the long dress and peered down at it. She was surprised that he didn’t mind, but she knew it wouldn’t matter.

“They’d still be white, though.”

“I have plants that can be used as dyes. They will not be strong, nor do I have many colours, but I’m sure we could find something that will stain them enough to your liking.” He lifted his hand and covered his snout while tapping it with a forefinger. “No one else has asked to change the colour, but I think I would appreciate the difference.”

“Yes, please!” she nearly squealed, bouncing on the spot as a bright smile spread over her lips.

I want to wear anything but the colour white! To no longer feel like some sacrificial virgin maiden.

His glowing orbs swiftly changed to purple at her smile, and a tiny flinch twitched her features. It was the second time she’d seen them turn to that colour, but she didn’t know what it meant.

When her joy faded, his eyes turned back to blue, and he made a sound as if he was clearing his throat. He turned away from her to head into the kitchen, reaching up high to open one of the cabinets she wouldn’t have a hope in the world reaching unless she climbed the counter.

After grabbing a large ceramic pot and a crudely made metal spike, he retrieved a key from his jacket pocket and unlocked the front door. Reia was both apprehensive and giddy about following.

The inside of this log cabin house was strangely beautiful as it held nature and trinkets within. She was curious to know what it looked like from the outside as well as to see this garden he apparently had.

“You must remain close to me until I have finished the circle, but once I have, you are welcome to venture within it.”

Her feet found a distressed wooden porch, and she poked her head out of the doorway hesitantly.

Made of wood, it had a railing where the corners had beams that held up a roof. The dill bundled ornaments with the rope, berries, bone, and bells hung from both corners.

“What are those?” she asked as she pointed to them.

“Minor protections that shield Demons from entering the house. They are weak as they can break under the wind, and once the living aspects of them have started to wither, the ward decays.”

She nodded in understanding before her eyes swept over the forest as she followed behind him when he started walking down the three porch steps she’d blindly walked up the day before.

Yep. It’s as gloomy as I’d thought it’d be. There was a grey mist smoking between all the trees, making the area appear ghostly and surreal. The further in she could see, the bluer and blacker it seemed within the shadows.

She was thankful it was quite a fair distance as the cabin was in the middle of a large clearing of short grass with patches of dirt.

“If you like, you can assist me in the future with making them as they do not require magic. They themselves create a bond with the world once tied together. Even humans can use them for protection.”

“I didn’t know we could make items like that.”

He shrugged as he brought her closer and closer to the forest border. A deep emotion lanced her chest.

“Control your fear,” he told her sternly, his head turning so he could look at her from over his shoulder. “I would not have allowed you out here with me if I could not protect you.”

She believed him, and felt that spike of anxiety lessening.

“However, stay behind me.”

Then he knelt onto the ground and shoved the metal spike into a groove already present. He sliced it sideways, following it as he carved it deeper. Once he’d spanned about three feet, he placed the ceramic pot on the ground, pulled the lid off, and began sprinkling a white powdery substance into the groove.

“What is that?” she asked while watching him with interest.

“Salt. It acts as a barrier.” He pointed to the carving line he had yet to dig into. “I only do this when I have one of you humans here. It helps to keep the Demons out. However, not much needs to be done to erase it. Simply throw dirt over it and that section is able to be walked through.” He stood, walked over to where he’d pointed, and started carving into it as well before sprinkling more salt. “The weak ones are stupid and have never figured it out.”

“I don’t understand, though.” She frowned as she clasped her hands behind her back and leaned forward to watch him better. “Why don’t you just use the same protection ward you used in the village when you took me?”

“I can only have one of those cast at a time, and it requires the blood of a human to do it.”

A smirk cruelly pressed into her lips as it curled them.

“I give you my permission to take my blood and cast it here now.”

You forced me to come here, and I will gladly take away your protection. The village people could die for all she cared for how they had treated her over the years.

His head peeked at her over his shoulder, tilting it like he found what she said as odd, before shaking it. It made that subtle rattling sound that once creeped her out because it reminded her of the noise Demons made, but she was beginning to become accustomed to it from him.

“The bargain has been made. I can only cast it once every decade, which is why I only ever come for an offering then. I cannot do it again until the allotted time is over.”

Reia pursed her lips together. *Well, that’s a pity.*

It took him nearly an hour to move halfway around the house on his knees as she stood behind him to watch, but she lost her interest when something else stole her attention.

They eventually came close to the garden he’d been speaking of.

Oh wow! Surrounded by a small fence of wooden stakes and slotted in horizontal logs, was a long and wide garden of varying plants.

She didn't know how to farm, since the village never allowed her to walk anywhere near their food as if she'd cast a disease over it, but she thought she may know what a handful of the plants were.

Cabbages, lettuce, tomatoes, and pumpkins were easy to tell since they grew above ground. She thought she saw the familiar stalks of radishes, onions, and carrots. The blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries were easy to pick out because of their colours within the bushes.

There were no tree plants like apples or oranges, other than the hazelnut tree – which was relatively small.

There were also many more herb plants she couldn't identify besides the dill and mint, and a handful of flower bushes that weren't budding because it was still too close to winter, though it appeared they were trying.

He said the temperature in the Veil is well controlled. Warmer winters, cooler summers, which seemed like the perfect environment to grow plants. Especially since the sun was fading into the afternoon, but she could still see a sliver of its light haloing one last shrub over the tops of the forest trees.

I was right. I did see sunlight in the yard. She walked over to it so she could greet it, holding her hands out and wiggling her fingers as though it was tangible and she could touch it. She felt the warmth that cascaded over her hands before she turned her face up to it. *I bet it showers this garden completely.*

How... beautiful. There was a place of light in the Veil.

She could see that the clearing had been created by someone uprooting trees to make it bigger and that gap allowed enough sunlight to make its way through the forest and grey fog.

She smiled at her hands as she watched it glittering before the last spark of it disappeared when the sun dropped away over the trees. It was still early afternoon, so she imagined it was only able to reach here for a very few short hours.

Still, this was hope that his home wasn't as dreary as she'd thought it'd be.

Quick huffing and snorting caught her attention as something thumped quickly across the ground. Her face shot to the side while she stood in the middle of the garden just as she saw a Demon running straight for her on all fours.

Oh shit! Reia backed away quickly from it and tripped over a plant in the garden, falling to her bottom with an oomphft.

It wrapped his black, claw-tipped hand around her ankle right before it screamed and released her. Then, there was a black shadow sprinting into her line of sight as Orpheus gripped it around the throat right after it let her go in pain.

"Mavka!" it yelled before it gave a choke when Orpheus must have squeezed harder.

His growl was deep and bestial as she watched him claw his way through its shoulder with his other hand.

"Do not touch!" he roared.

Not that it mattered when he ripped its head from its body a moment later as though he was simply popping the cork off a bottle.

Purple gooey blood splattered from its headless body before he tossed both to the side, out of the garden and into the clearing beside it.

He spun to her, his eyes a bright, glowing red with his fingers curled with tension, his sharp claws dripping with moisture.

"I told you to remain with me!"

He looked frightfully gigantic standing over her while she was almost lying in the dirt. She had to crane her neck far back to look up to his face.

And yet, Reia wasn’t afraid of him. Sure, she was definitely worried, and even though the red in his glowing orbs obviously symbolised something terrible, she knew he didn’t *want* to hurt her.

“I’m sorry! I saw the garden and forgot!” she yelled up to him, but her voice didn’t hold any anger. It was strained, more like she was pleading her case to calm him. “And you said I’d be fine with the amulet.”

He lowered until he was above her on all fours, his claws digging into the earth to create a crunching sound next to her shoulders.

“From possible death! That doesn’t mean you still cannot come to harm! A weak Demon may not be able to hold you, but they can still strike you with their claws.” He came even closer, a growl present as it rumbled from deep within his chest. “And female, if you are bleeding profusely, the Demons will come here to find I have already eaten you! There is only so much I can handle before I lose myself to my own urges of hunger.” He removed one hand from the ground to place it around the back of her head to cradle it in his large palm as he lifted her closer. “And I do not *want* that.”

She could hear the sincerity in his voice, like he wanted her safety more than anything. It caused her gut to tighten in response.

“Why are all you humans so foolish around me? It’s as if you all want to find your deaths when I am trying my best to avoid it. I said you could venture around my home when I was done.”

Reia averted her gaze, knowing he was right, and she was the one who’d made the mistake.

“Like I said, I’m sorry. It’s just, I saw the garden and that there was sunlight and I thought it was pretty.”

“Pretty?” he asked, his tone a few decimals lighter in anger. The growling stopped as he looked around them. “You… like something about my home?”

“Who wouldn’t like this garden?” She gestured to it, allowing him to cradle her head as not to upset him further. She also didn’t find it particularly... unpleasant. Then she grumbled quietly, “The inside of it isn’t too bad either.”

“You like my home?” His eyes turned from red to yellow as he tilted his head and began to gently lay her back down on the ground.

“Yes,” she answered. It had its wonderful, cosy qualities with its trinkets and woodsy comforts. “But it is still a cage.”

She wouldn’t allow him to forget that she wasn’t truly happy here. No human would be.

At her words, his eyes faded to a deep blue, darker than usual. He backed away from her to slowly rise to his feet. She got up on her own, only realising he’d offered his hand to help her when she was done.

He clenched it into a fist before bringing it to his side.

He looked around them once more. “If you like the garden, then I can teach you how to tend to it as I was taught.”

“Someone showed you how? A human?”

The Duskwalker turned away from her to head back to salt ring he was carving. He was still huffing in anger.

“Yes. Someone from a very long time ago.”

She wondered if he turned away to avoid her stare. She followed him to stay close like she was supposed to.

“Was that person also the one who showed you this house?”

She wondered if humans had once lived in the Veil before the Demons came. They hadn’t always been on Earth.

He knelt down and started shoving the metal spike into the ground to dig.

“No. She asked me to build it for her, and I did.”

“What about all the furniture?” Her voice was lit with excitement and curiosity. “I was surprised to find human items like a bed, chairs, and even a cooking hearth.”

“She told me what she wanted, and I built it or obtained it.”

“Who is she? How long ago was this?” Reia had so many questions about this that they threatened to pour out from her all at once.

“Eons ago.”

Silence followed.

“You didn’t tell me who she was.”

And when he didn’t answer, moving onto another section, she realised he wasn’t intending to. She puffed her cheeks in irritation.

“Fine. What happened to her?”

His reply was curt and sharp as he said, “I didn’t eat her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She gulped. *Okay, obviously a sensitive topic. Does that mean it was someone he cared about?* The idea that he cared about anyone didn’t fully seem plausible to her.

She stopped asking about the mystery woman and watched him work quietly, remaining only a few steps behind him. He eventually made his way around until it joined where he started.

When he stood, showing her he was done, he faced the sky.

“Night is falling, and you must remain inside when it is dark.” Reia agreed with that curfew completely. “Would you like to pick some food from the garden to eat before we go inside?”

Orpheus watched the little human he’d brought into his home with much interest as she began to work the cooking

hearth. It looked fairly similar to his fireplace where he'd placed stone and rock high and wide in a recess around the timber to protect it.

The hearth was small so that the flames could never reach the wood, and it sat in a small rock-like basin where he'd already placed timber good for burning in it. A small hole acted as a chimney for it, but he'd made sure it wasn't wide enough for a Demon to crawl through.

The fireplace he'd made had multiple vents with small chimneys for this very reason.

He was seated at the table, working with the fresh dill and red christmas berries, while she was placing a pot of water over the fire.

While it was boiling, she walked over to the kitchen counter and began peeling and cutting the potato, carrots, and other various vegetables she'd obtained so she could make some form of soup.

He'd always found enjoyment in watching the humans he brought here cook. Even though they made similar meals, he didn't think he'd ever smelt the exact same one made by two of them. He wanted to assist, to *learn*, since he once knew how to, but had forgotten over the long eons of being alone.

He didn't try to since he knew they didn't like it when he was close to them and peering over their shoulders to observe.

"Why are you making more of those?" Reia asked while she cut, peeking at him occasionally as if she wanted to know where he was always. "You just placed the others yesterday, and I thought you said they lasted a few days."

He turned his sight down to the protection trinkets he was making.

"They were ones I prepared before I left so I could string them as soon as we arrived." He tied the twine around the first one before he reached into a wooden jar that contained different small animal bones, such as bird and rabbit parts.

“They are already withered, and I should change them before they are too weak and break apart from the wind.”

When he was working on the third one, he noticed she was looking towards what he was doing often. She eventually came to stand next to the long edge of the table connected to the shorter one he was seated at.

Orpheus paused when she grabbed one of the trinkets by the bundle of dill stems and inspected it, making the bells jingle. She’d reached her hand right next to his own and was standing barely a foot away from him.

He couldn’t remember if he’d ever had a human willingly come near him of their own volition before if it wasn’t for their safety.

Actually, the only reason he’d allowed her outside with him earlier, when he had the others stay inside until he was done carving the salt circle, is because she didn’t seem too bothered being near him. And Orpheus always wanted to keep his humans close or in his presence.

“You said you would teach me,” she commented as she spun the trinket this way and that.

“Now?” he asked in surprise, a yellow hue filling his vision. “But you are currently cooking.”

She placed it on the table and waved her hand up and down dismissively. “The vegetables are boiling. They’ll take a while before they are ready.”

She wants to learn. The yellow lightened into a brighter shade, a pleasant emotion filling him. One he thought might be delight or happiness.

Not wanting to waste time in case she changed her mind, he pulled apart the protection trinket he’d been making so he could show her from the beginning.

She watched as he bundled the dill together and tied it with a piece of white ribbon. A thrill was sent through his entire being, ruffling the inhuman parts of him, when she grabbed her own bundle to copy him.

“It needs to be tighter,” he told her with a hint of uncertainty in his voice, unsure if criticising her would make her lose enthusiasm with the task.

She nodded and just pulled the ribbon tighter until the dill’s leaf stems flared due to the pressure. He showed her to then tie the red christmas berries to the ribbon before making a bow. Her gaze was intense as she watched him attach the jingle bells, thankful she didn’t seem to realise they’d come from the headpieces of other offerings, before she did it herself.

Orpheus thought she would be averse to the next part as he began to twine string around the centre of the leg bone of a bird so it could dangle down, but she didn’t hesitate at all to reach into the jar and do the same.

He was pleased that she didn’t flinch when he reached over to take it from her, nodding his head as he inspected her work.

“Perfect, this will do just as good as my own.”

The sharp angles of her eyes softened while the edges of her lips curled just a little.

“Well, you’re a good teacher, I guess.” She wiped her hands on her dress. “You must have shown your other offerings many times.”

He twisted his head. “Not at all. You are the first who has wanted to learn.”

“What, really?” Her eyes grew wide before they shot down to what she had made. “It looked so easy to do, though.”

Orpheus refused to answer.

His other offerings had remained in the bedroom he’d shown her the previous day, generally refusing to leave it unless it was to be bathed or to eat. He thought if they had lived long enough, they may have ventured the house or its surrounding yard, but there had never been enough time.

For reasons unknown to him, whenever they came to Veil and saw his home, their fear had always grown. Either he’d react to it, and they never made it inside, or they’d suppress

it enough and find a way to escape. He'd boarded the window in her room for that reason alone after the second time one of them had climbed through it and ran away.

He also didn't react well when they refused to leave their bedroom, growing angrier and angrier by the day. He brought them here to ease his loneliness, not deepen it, and it always created an ache in him to know there was something there that obviously hated him.

They'd offered themselves to him, but they must not have understood the reality of it until they came here with him.

Reia, however, was the first to be this relaxed even only after a few days of being with him. Was the first he'd taken outside while he carved his salt circle, was the first that had allowed him to carry her here, was the first to ask to learn how to make the protection trinkets.

She is the first to smile at me.

Will she be different? Not much made Orpheus afraid, but he feared becoming attached to her.

He was tired of growing attached to his offerings for them to only leave him one way or another.

When he didn't answer, she shrugged and went over to the cooking hearth to stab a knife into the vegetables. Happy with them, she took the pot away from the fire and began to do something inside it, perhaps crush some of the softer vegetables, but he wasn't sure from his placement.

Orpheus grabbed the trinket she'd made and stared at it with a swirl of emotion weighing heavily in his chest. He didn't want to use it. He wanted to keep it as a token from her.

She made me something.

He closed his hand around it before gently pushing it into his pocket, planning on finding a way to preserve it well enough that it didn't decay completely, and he could hang it in his private room. He'd make another when she was asleep to replace it.

Reia used a wooden ladle to scoop her liquid meal into a bowl and then placed it onto the table. She had to climb the chair because it was elevated enough to be able to reach the table, and she had to kneel in it so she could eat comfortably.

“You are going to eat here?”

She paused as she was blowing away the steam from a spoonful of food as a frown creased her brows.

“Where else would I eat?”

His head turned in the direction of her sleeping room, used to most of those in past taking their food to it rather than sit here with him. Not all, but most, and those that did usually looked uncomfortable whereas her shoulders lacked any tension.

“Would you prefer if I eat somewhere else?”

“No.” He shook his head, nearly wincing when it rattled since he knew the humans were uncomfortable of the sound. She didn’t seem to care. “You are welcome to eat your meals wherever you like.”

“Even outside?” Her voice turned higher pitched, almost hopeful.

“Why would you want to eat outside?”

The forest was gloomy. He didn’t understand why she’d want to look at it for a long period of time.

“I didn’t think the sun ever reached the ground in the Veil, but I saw that it would wash over the garden throughout midday.”

“You are correct.”

“Well, I thought it might be nice if I could sit in it each day then.” Her lips turned pouty as she grumbled, “But I’ll miss having eggs for breakfast, though.”

“Eggs, like from a bird?”

He tried to think if birds made their nests in the Veil for him to obtain some for her, but he didn’t think so considering Demons would eat them before they even had time to make them.

“Pfft, no!” Then she laughed, her eyes crinkling at the side with humour at what he said when he didn’t find his question funny at all. His vision darkened when he felt mocked, but he only knew so much about humans. “Eggs from chickens.”

They eat eggs from chickens only?

He didn’t understand the difference.

“Don’t worry about it.” She shook her head before scooping her spoon into her liquid meal, before nodding in the direction of the trinkets. “If humans can make those to protect their houses, how come we don’t know about them?”

He stared down at them. “Humans tend not to ask me too many questions. They are too afraid to want to obtain knowledge from me that can benefit them.”

“It would have been handy for my family to know,” she said quietly, her spoon falling to rest in the bowl as she held onto it.

She stared deeply into her food.

“You said you didn’t have anyone you care for.”

Her back stiffened before she continued eating. “I don’t.”

“But you just mentioned your family. I’ve come to learn that such relationships are important to your kind.”

“Mine are all dead.” Her eyes narrowed when a dark emotion fell over her features. He wasn’t sure if it was sadness or anger, or perhaps a mixture of the two.

He took a long time to ask his question, wary about upsetting her. “Did Demons kill them?”

Her head turned to the side to look away as she said, “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

He didn’t press the issue.

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On the third day of Reia living in the Duskwalker's home, he brought her outside to show her something he had done.

He showed her a tree stump that came to her knee height and the small side table from the living room that had been placed at the back of the house right in the middle of the garden.

"You made me a place to sit?" she asked, turning to him with a frown.

"You sat in the dirt yesterday to eat your breakfast." He was referencing the previous day when Reia had sat on the ground in the middle of the garden and ate fruit, picking freely from what was available. He tilted his head, before it turned to look around at the garden that was filled with warm sunlight. "I can take it away if that is what you would prefer."

She could see he'd already gone ahead and placed a bowl with a wooden spoon on the table. Although he produced her bathwater by using a spell with his blood, he would actually leave for a short while to obtain water from a fresh stream not too far away for her to drink.

She figured the water would take too long to carry in loads to fill the tub, and that he'd had issues in the past with people not wanting to drink the water created from his

blood. Reia was a curious person and had tasted the tub water before he started applying the oils to her skin each morning and night, and found it wasn't good for consumption.

Although it didn't have a smell, there was a gross taste to it, one that was metallic and bloody.

She knew the cup of water already on the table next to the bowl must be from the bucket of water he carried from the stream.

"No, I like this better." She sat on the stump and gave him a forced smile to show him she accepted it.

"I can make you a proper chair."

Reia felt something tug on her heart strings.

"You don't have to go out of your way for me."

She turned her gaze down to her lap as she brushed her fingers over the top surface of the stump to feel its roughness. The roots were still connected and looked as though they'd been snaped off to create a firm base so it didn't tip.

This is really thoughtful.

He was being really thoughtful.

But she didn't want him to do things for her. She didn't want him to change his home when she had every intention of figuring out a way to leave.

She'd managed to wrangle up the courage yesterday to find out what he'd eat while she was here since he wasn't intending to eat her. He'd told her he would eventually leave to hunt. Animals, he was planning on going to the surface to hunt for a deer or a wolf. However, she also thought he might hunt a human if he stumbled upon one. He said he even fished in the stream nearby occasionally when mating season had finished and there were more fish travelling through it.

The sun faded over the right of the forest. She knew from travelling here that they had always been walking towards

the sunsets, which meant all she needed to do was go the opposite way, and she'd hopefully find the Veil's cliff walls.

She'd decided that if she survived that long and she could garner enough of his trust that he left to hunt – because she doubted he'd do it now – that she would leave then.

I just have to be good until then. Don't anger him, don't make him hungry, don't accidentally hurt myself so I bleed too much.

She'd been making a mental list of what not to do. Survival was her intention, and with the circlet amulet he'd given her, the bathing he said that hid her human scent, and hopefully with her cloak shielding her, she could walk through the Veil safely if she was smart.

Which meant, Reia had come to a distressing decision this morning.

"I want to make you comfortable," he rebuffed, making her inwardly cringe.

Guilt shot through her. He wanted a companion, a fucking *friend*, and Reia was planning on fleeing. He at times seemed lonely in some of the things he said, like when he'd told her no other human had wanted to make trinkets with him. She also got the impression they hadn't wanted to eat in front of him either.

Don't upset him.

"If you want to make a chair, you are welcome to."

He nodded before moving out of the garden.

"Do not leave the light until I return."

Listening to his command, she grabbed her bowl and walked in the garden that was showered in bright sunshine. She picked the fruit she wanted before returning to sit on the stump.

He returned not much later and placed a second cup on the table before backing away, giving her space as though he thought she'd prefer that he did. Orpheus never crowded her.

“What’s this?” she asked, reaching forward to find it was hot and the liquid inside had sweet smell to its honey colour.

“You do not have to drink it if you do not want to, but it is a tea.” He walked away until he was at the opening of the fence on the other side. “It’s the only one I know how to make.”

She hesitated, but the smell of it was rather inviting.

He was also watching her, almost as if with anticipation, and she found she couldn’t deny him because of that fact. Slowly lifting it to her face, she sniffed its contents before taking a sip.

Oh wow! This is actually really nice.

She took a bigger drink, and watched his eyes change from blue to bright yellow within the breath of a second, flashing so quickly to it.

“Thank you, I like it.”

He nodded, before moving away to sit with his back resting against the timber stake of the fence and face the forest.

“I will watch over you while you eat.”

Even though it was late morning, and the sun was shining, the gloom of the Veil’s forest was ever present. The blue mist never faded, and the swallowing darkness made it disturbing to try to look through it. However, it was also serene and mystical. Almost as though she was no longer on earth, but in a place beyond, like the afterlife.

She half-expected a ghost to peek through it.

She looked over the garden, having learnt more of what was planted here the day before because he’d taken the time to show her. She also wasn’t the one that ripped the plants she used for her cooking since he was determined about doing it himself, like he wanted nothing more than to assist her.

As if her mind couldn’t stray away, she eventually found her gaze falling onto the back of him. His bony skull turned

right and then left slowly, appearing to listen out carefully to the forest surrounding them.

The sun cast his shadow forwards, highlighting the whiteness at the back of his skull to the point it almost seemed to glisten. His horns were twisty and flared up at the base before swiftly pointing backwards, diagonal to the sky.

She no longer found him frightening whatsoever, despite her lingering aversion to him. His consideration and thoughtfulness had begun to chip away at those thoughts, leaving behind the confusing creature she laid her eyes upon.

He was inhuman, that could never be changed. He didn't look human, and although he had obvious humanity inside him, he wasn't truly one within either. He wasn't a human in a monster's body, his mind was too… beastly for that by his growls and grunts, but the bits of humanity she could see were unravelling her.

I want to hate him. She really did, more than anything, but other than keeping her caged here, there wasn't much else for her to hate. He didn't threaten her. He only told her the truth of the dangerous situation she was in. He didn't hurt her, nor was he mean or cruel.

He tried to make sure to give her foods she would like and water to keep her hydrated. She was so clean she thought she may be the cleanest person in the world considering he bathed her morning and night.

Halfway through her food, she turned her head down to her lap again, but this time pulling at the skirt of the dress she wore. She kept it long to keep the worst of the chill out, even though she'd much rather have it shorter. She didn't like spinach, so he'd allowed her to take as much as she wanted to boil it and soak this dress in the previous day.

She could tell he wanted to help her. He had lingered just outside the kitchen while she boiled the plants, but he was wary. She constantly felt this from him, especially when he

quietly told her she needed to prepare the cloth she was planning to dye in salt so it would actually stick to it.

It was now a pale green with the white barely present.

It wasn't her preferred colour, but she didn't really know how to dye clothing using food, and she hadn't wanted to waste the other plants on a possible failed attempt. The green was patchy, but she was still content with it. She would soak it again tonight and hang it up so that by morning it may be better.

She no longer felt like a fool in a wedding dress, and it brought her overwhelming relief. He allowed it, was allowing anything she wanted, while trying his best to make her content. He constantly asked if she needed something, wanted anything. He'd offered to even try to catch her a fish by the stream if she preferred meat.

The prickling emotion she felt in her chest was unwelcome, knowing it was something akin to tenderness for him. She felt many emotions for the Duskwalker.

Pity in his loneliness. Humour in his lack of understanding of humans. Ease because he wanted to protect her. Frustration at keeping her. Tenderness because he was sweet and kind in his own way.

And finally, nervousness, because bath time had become unsettling for all the *wrong* reasons.

She was calm about it now, after three days of being washed twice a day, she'd grown accustomed to it. However, her body kept having strange reactions to it, and each time it grew stronger as if her flesh was anticipating the touch.

It was intimate. The room was always dim with just enough candlelight to keep away the worst of the shadows while pleasant smelling dried herbs were burnt like incense to create a relaxing environment. The water was always perfectly warm, and the heat did wonders to soften her muscles.

Yet, her skin would tingle as his gloves ran over her as he washed her perfunctorily – like he was doing nothing but washing clothes or dishes. It should have felt abhorrent, yet her nipples would strain for a stroke, her clit would throb after a touch.

It was mild, but still unsettling.

I'm totally not attracted to him. She fisted her hands before grabbing her spoon to dig into the blueberries with anger.

His touch was delicate. He'd begun to wear only his button-down shirt during it so that he didn't wet the sleeves of his jacket – although he wore it the rest of the time. It highlighted a human-shaped chest of muscle and a waist that tucked in sharply to narrow hips.

It also allowed her to see that black *fur* poked out from the high collar around his neck, but it didn't appear to go much further down his body since it didn't poke out from other areas. She was beginning to wonder what he looked like underneath all that clothing he was hiding behind, and she blushed deeply in embarrassment.

She was ashamed because it was out of thrilling curiosity, rather than discovering the true horror of a monster.

A monster whose deep, growly voice was soothing and tingly to her senses. And she was beginning to enjoy watching his glowing orbs change colours.

Different shades of yellow. The deeper blue than normal. Red was the most common change and something she tried to avoid as much as possible. Only twice she'd seen them turn purple. She wondered what emotions they portrayed, and how to get them to change to other colours – like green, or orange, or even pink if they did.

His eyes were somehow... prettier in the dark. She would always know where he was and, in his own way, he was ethereal to look at. Not handsome, he didn't have a human face to be granted such a word.

But, now that she was growing comfortable enough around him, she found he had a sort of enchanting lure about the way he looked. An other-worldly beauty.

Even now, watching him sitting on the other side of the garden in the sunlight made that odd beauty shine from him.

Come on, Reia. He has a fucking skull for a face. She kept questioning why she didn't find him totally unappealing. *Is it because I don't totally hate his touch?* She knew it had to be because she'd never been touched before. That's what she kept telling herself.

Great. I'm a god damn pervert.

She thought she might find it that much worse when she planned to ask him tonight to not use his gloves.

She wanted the protection of having her scent hidden for the entire day. She didn't want him to bathe her twice a day, but rather once. Minimising their time of it, she hoped, would help. *It can't be that much different with his gloves off.* Maybe the horrors of seeing his real hands would disturb her enough to quell her emotions.

Reia was just making sure she would be prepared for when he finally left her to go hunting. He may leave her for longer if he didn't have to return to bathe her, and that would give her more time to put distance between herself and this damn house before he returned.

The quicker she earned his trust, the sooner that would be. She would run as far as she could, and hopefully he would never be able to find her so she could be free.

Orpheus’ vision eventually faded from having yellow at the edges to its usual blue, but the lingering feeling of delight remained in his chest long afterward. *She drank the tea I made for her.* He knew if he had a human face with skin, he’d be beaming with a grin.

He continued to listen to the world and sensed no Demons for the moment. They occasionally came close by, but they left, paying him no mind. They didn’t like loitering around his home since they knew he would attack them if they got too close to it – whether he was housing a human or not.

I wonder what kind of chair she would like. If she’d prefer something with a back, or just a plain stool to have outside. *Maybe I should ask her.* A flare of excitement was lit in his belly, hoping if he continued to make things for her, do things for her, she would grow to like him.

He would change everything about his home, make a new bed for her if she wanted it, string new ornaments with her preferred designs in mind, if it would make her content with him.

There was even a place he’d like to take her, somewhere very dangerous for a human, but he would make sure she was safe and protected as long as it meant she was able to pick things she wanted for herself. Items she could bring back here so she could decorate his home for herself.

It was foolish. He was being foolish, but Reia *was* different.

The reason there were so few Demons loitering around his home was because there was no scent of fear from her. It

was completely gone.

She ate her meals in his presence, drank his tea, sat in the seat he'd made her outside. The protection trinket she'd made currently hung above where he slept, and he'd stared at it over the past two nights in wonder that a human had made something for him.

And she speaks with me. He'd never had one of his offerings conversate so frequently with him. *She asks me questions about myself.* And she didn't seem to be disturbed by his answers.

He felt... he felt like he didn't have to hide the truth from her so much. She knew he'd been violent to her kind in the past, and yet she didn't turn away from such conversations in distress or disgust.

Now that her scent was no longer tainted by the sweetness of fear, he'd come to *adore* the way she smelled. He found himself often being closer to her than he should, just to be able to deeply take it in.

And her hair looks like pure streaks of sunlight. It even *glittered* in the sunlight, just as bright and dazzling. Her eyes were such a deep forestry green that he'd found himself starting to become lost in them, like a wandering traveller who'd lost their way, when she stared at him.

She looks at me, rather than shying away. *She's smiled at me,* and he couldn't stop the way his heart pounded at seeing it. And her laughter, even though just as rare, was the sweetest song.

They remained outside until the sun faded, and although it had been hours, his desire to protect her kept him rooted in place without complaint. If she liked being outside so much, then he would do this duty every day without protest. He hoped one day she would allow him to be seated next to her and allow him to gaze at her while they did this.

I want to lay my head in her lap.

He'd always felt a deep sense of loneliness around the others, but even now, with the small distance between

them, it didn’t echo inside him any deeper than it usually did.

Reia let him know when she was ready to go inside, and he followed after she picked out the food she wanted to bring inside for her meal that night.

He attempted to look busy by starting up the fireplace to keep her warm even though he didn’t need the heat. He cleaned every surface he could, mildly rearranged his ornaments just so he could watch her while she moved around the kitchen without bothering her. He worried that if he sat at the table and stared at her with curiosity and interest like he wanted to that it would unsettle her, and she’d retreat into her sleeping room.

She is boiling spinach again. Her dress was pale green already, darker at the hem and sleeve cuffs because the dye had dripped and settled there when she hung it up. The lace designs were also darker than the rest, as if that material absorbed it better.

Her dinner meal, when complete, filled his home with a fragrance of different vegetables. It didn’t cause his stomach to grumble in hunger, but it gave the house life he could never give it.

“I’ve used the last of the water,” she told him as she placed her food on the table and knelt on the chair to eat.

“Then I will get you more in the morning,” he hastily answered, wanting to make sure she wasn’t without anything she could need.

The stream was only about an hour away, maybe less, and he could be back before she woke.

He wanted to sit with her while she ate, wanted to be close to her, but he placed himself in the large fur-covered chair with armrests in front of the fire instead. His mind, however, didn’t stray from Reia eating, his other senses taking her in since his eyes couldn’t.

It was only when he heard the clanking of her spoon and bowl along with her feet pattering around telling him she

was done that Orpheus stood.

“I will prepare your bath,” he told her dully, like he did most nights after she’d eaten.

The colour of her pale cheeks became a shade darker, making him tilt his head because he’d never seen them do that before. They didn’t take long to pale once more after she nodded. He left, grabbing a match from the table to strike it as he walked down the hallway.

He began lighting the candles. Three were cluttered together in the corner of the room on top of a large chunk of amethyst he’d found many years ago in a cave during his wanderings. It was the biggest piece he’d found, and he obtained the rest of the near clear, pure stone many times in his life. Another three candles were on the ground closer to the tub. One larger one was next to where he’d placed the oil he made that barely had any smell to it, but was effective for what he was doing nonetheless.

He threw the match into the metal bowl with dry herbs in it so the area would smell nicer and more relaxing.

She came in not long after he was finished and waited, holding a bundled sleeping gown she’d chosen from her closet to her chest. He tilted his head, twisting it a little, when she looked more nervous than she usually did.

She was acting like the morning after the first night he’d brought her here.

Taking in a deep breath, she stepped inside and closed the door before swiftly removing the dress she’d been wearing throughout the day.

She covered her breasts with one arm and her lower regions with the other as she walked over to the tub he’d already filled with the use of his blood. He didn’t particularly like the spell, but it was the easiest way to fill something of this size without having to go back and forth from the stream, and then the same with heating the water over the hearth.

Orpheus didn’t have any heat or fire magic. This was the only one that allowed him to do it.

Once she’d slipped inside the water, he waited for her to adjust and for her shoulders to relax before he turned to open the jar of oil.

“A-actually,” she said in an odd, high-pitched voice. “Could you not use your gloves?”

Pausing with his fingers about to dip inside the jar, he snapped his head to her in surprise.

“You want to forego for the gloves?”

Squirming, she nodded lightly. “I-I don’t want to do this twice a day anymore. I’m sure it’s not good for my skin.”

He turned his palms upwards to stare down at them, concerned about what she would see beneath them.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Worry filled him as he reached inside the cuff of his shirt to start pulling the hem of one glove down until he removed it. But that wasn’t the only emotion that soared through him. A stronger, more prevalent one began to course as he removed the second. Excitement.

Excitement at touching her skin directly for the first time.

The oil felt cold and wet against his fingertips as he sheathed his claws like he did every time, as not to scratch her delicate skin.

What will she feel like? Was the snowy skin just as soft as he imagined?

The flinch her body gave did little to quell his delight when he ran his hand over her bare, rounded shoulder and discovered she was smoother than any surface he’d ever touched and was silky like that of a flower petal. He wondered if her skin was warmer because of the bath as he slipped over her bicep, digging in to feel the muscle yield against his palms.

His ministrations were usually indifferent in appeal to her, but he’d always enjoyed doing this. This time, he couldn’t

stop himself from being slower, and more attentive, as awe filled him.

The flesh of his hands had to be rough against her skin, but she was so unbelievably supple. Little muscles were tight with natural tension as he massaged them more than he usually did just so he could truly feel them. Tendons were hard as they connected to fragile bones that he attempted to be delicate with as he felt around her elbow.

Her little hands brought him intense interest when he felt how dainty they were as he dug his fingertips into the webbing of her splayed fingers. He even brushed the pad of his thumb over her dull, yet long, fingernails.

He almost couldn’t believe he was doing this. He’d never bathed any of his offerings without his gloves, and he was entranced by her body already.

Working on her other arm, he gave it the same attention as if the memory of the first one wasn’t enough to be burned into him.

She suddenly grabbed his hand to still him. Frozen in uncertainty, he watched her lean forward to inspect it.

“Your hand…” She gasped lightly, turning it palm up before twisting it back over so she could see the back.

His skin was a darkish grey, so very inhuman, although his hand was of similar shape to hers despite its size. A small lump of saliva clogged in his throat when she brushed her thumb over the knuckles where his hand met his fingers.

She was examining the protruding bone that rose out from his flesh, his knuckles white with them. His skin was actually attached to it, but it was split so each of the five fingerbone knuckles of his hand poked past his skin, including his thumb.

Turning his hand over again, she inspected the darker, calloused skin.

It was only when his fingers twitched at a tingling sensation due to her tickling his palm, that her hands flung away.

“Sorry!” she exclaimed.

Orpheus’ heart was beating fast. *She touched me.* She had willingly grabbed his hand and held it, brushed it, examined it with curiosity rather than horror.

“I did not mind,” he answered, his voice rougher than it had been a minute ago, his fur standing on end.

Done with her arms, he removed his hands so he could obtain more oil and dipped it into the water before he began to gently wash her face.

Her lips were plump as they yielded under the light pressure, her eyelashes a flutter as he slipped across her closed eyelids. His orbs faded from blue to purple when he moved his hand over her jaw and then her throat.

Desire was flaring inside him, stronger than he’d ever felt before, as she craned her neck to the side to assist him.

Her wet hair was silky as he ran his hands through it, massaging her scalp to make sure he got the oil to her skin through the thick strands.

He noticed a large scar behind her ear just at her hairline. Something had hit her, deep enough to leave noticeably raised skin. He moved her hair out of the way to see it was pink like it was only a few years old.

His heart was beginning to thunder while the purple in his vision deepened as his palms ran down her chest. He should have kept his touch indifferent, knew it was too intimate and slow as he cupped her breast to wash it, but Reia didn’t say anything in protest.

Perhaps she didn’t know or realise the change, that his touch was filled with want and desire.

He did notice that her lips thinned from her biting them shut and that her body twitched. Her brows drew together tightly when he went to the other breast, knowing he couldn’t linger even though he wished to. Her nipple was hard, and he felt the scrape of it against his palm before he flicked it with his thumb, just to make sure, as he moved away.

His desire waned when she made a noise of distress. He pressed his snout against the crook of her neck to smell her scent directly.

She yelped and jumped away from him and Orpheus flung his hands away from her body as his eyes turned white. Cupping her neck, she turned to him with wide eyes.

“W-why did you sniff me?”

He could see her chest was heaving.

“I thought you were afraid, so I was making sure,” he answered truthfully. “It is hard to tell through the water.”

“You were trying to smell fear?” Her eyes softened, her brows drawing together more in thought than emotion.

“You made a strange noise. If I smelt fear, I was going to ask you if you wanted me to put my gloves back on.”

But she didn’t smell of fear. That wasn’t why she’d made the noise, and he couldn’t understand why she had then.

She gave a laugh, but it didn’t hold humour. Rather, it seemed more panicky than anything.

“I–I wasn’t scared, and that tickled.”

Orpheus tilted his head in confusion.

“I didn’t know humans were ticklish on their necks. Only on their feet and underarms.”

Her face had already been flushed, it often was because of the warmth of the bathwater, but he thought it may have darkened ever so slightly.

“Sometimes we can be.” Her gaze was averted, her bottom lip pouty. “I-it’s fine. You can continue. I didn’t mean to fret.”

She returned to rest against the tub’s curvature and Orpheus hesitantly dipped his fingers into the oil.

Desire still clung to him, but it wasn’t as intense as it had been. He washed her back, starting somewhere that was less... intimate before he moved to her sides and then down her abdomen.

Her stomach dipped when he palmed down past her navel, but he barely noticed it as his fingertips felt the tickle

of the blonde curling hair of her pubic mound.

Despite his efforts, the flame of desire in his gut was heating once more to build into an inferno.

He reached for more oil, almost forgetting he needed to, as a pulse ran rampant through his body. It ruffled the inhuman parts of him at the foray of his fingers dipping into the slit of her body at the apex of her thighs. Lips caressed his fingers, while a hard nub he was curious about pressed against his flesh as he moved through her slit.

She dug the nails of both her hands into her thighs, her body twitching like she'd suppressed the urge to move under the touch.

Then he came out the other side between her cheeks. He washed both, giving each a singular, appreciative knead.

The hard part is over, he thought with a strain.

His fingers itched to explore this part of her, to delve. His control had almost faltered, his need had been overwhelming. It was soft, and slippery, and had so many different textures that he wanted to discover them all.

But he knew she didn't want him to, and he was cleaning her because he had to. Orpheus wanted her to like his touch, wanted her to like him, want him. But he doubted she would, and he was sure she'd be horrified to know he felt this way about her.

He thought her beautiful, and the more at ease she became with him, the more he allowed himself to see it. She was a complete contrast to his darkness, everything light.

Now that he was moving down her legs, his desire eased once more to allow doubt to fill him. *I am becoming fond of her.* She was making it too easy for him to allow hope.

He didn't want to bear that pain, but her actions, her words, even this request that he remove his gloves and give him the joy of feeling her directly, was hard to ignore.

I want her. To stay, to become his companion, to ease him.

He'd liked many of his offerings, but none so much as he did her already. She'd been with him a week, from the

moment that he took her from the village to now, and he was closer to her than any of the others.

Yearning was the emotion that caused his eyes to slowly fade back to blue as he washed her second foot. He drew his claw under her foot simply because he wanted to hear the sweet song of her laugh.

She didn't.

When he looked up swiftly, he met her eyes to find they were glued to him with her chest rising and falling in a rapid rate.

She didn't laugh.

"This usually tickles you," he said with surprise making his voice high. He did it again only to find her brows twitched.

His hand slipped over her ankles, his claws that he'd unsheathed to tickle her, scraping over the flesh of her calf as he lowered her leg. A strangled noise came from her before she covered her mouth with both hands.

His head tilted swiftly to the side to the sound, the rattling of bones coming from him. The noise she'd made caused him alarm.

"Is something the matter?"

"Nope," she squeaked behind her hands. "All peaches and cream here."

He shook his head. *I don't understand.* Then he rose to stand, having completed the spell that required he wash her from head to toe by his own hands.

"I am done." He waved to the folded cloth he had prepared for her to dry herself. "I will leave now."

She only nodded as he made his way around the tub and left. She didn't leave the bathing room as quick as she usually did, lingering in there for far longer than she ever had before.

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A bony head floated in darkness. His *bony head floated in darkness. The skull of a wolf with the horns of an Impala antelope.*

Reia felt as though she was floating underwater, but she could breathe, and it didn't feel cold. It didn't feel like anything, like swallowing nothingness.

His glowing orbs were shining a bright blue, shielding away the frightfulness of the void surrounding them by giving her light and comfort. She was riveted to them, unable to look away.

Her attention was drawn to him even when it seemed like he was floating around her, and her head spun to keep her gaze on him. She didn't know where she was or what was happening.

A Dream? *She thought. Not a nightmare, it felt too safe for that.*

A trailing stroke of a sharp claw down her spine made her gasp as a shiver shot through her. She tried to search for the hands that touched her, but they disappeared into the blackness before she saw them.

She found Orpheus' floating skull once more.

It almost appeared like he was dancing around her, flying around her body as she floated. Her heart raced whenever

he came closer before he backed away again.

Two sets of claws stroked from the nape of her neck and up through her hair, bunching it as the points scraped deliciously over her scalp. A gasping moan broke from her.

That feels nice.

Her nipples budded, while a torrent of prickling goosebumps broke out across her sensitive flesh and down her body, until it pooled as heat inside her belly.

The hands disappeared once more, only allowing her a glimpse of them before they were gone.

Anticipation and excitement began to thrum inside her for the next secret, unexpected touch. Her breathing was short, her cheeks and body hot. Her heart was so loud and fast that it resonated through the void.

She wasn't afraid, far from it. Reia was aroused, deeply aroused, as he played this game of hide and touch with her in the darkness.

The next time she felt those hands, it was over the bundles of nerves just under her calves. It was a familiar touch she'd already experienced before, and an electrifying shot buckled her knees as it shot through them all the way to her aching core.

She was wet, so wet, that she thought the drip of her arousal was beginning to float around her in glistening drops.

She could hear his deep huffs. Gruff and low. Then there was that long and lowing snort he made, like when he occasionally sniffed her skin with his snout pressed against her.

Her toes curled when she felt it now, a soft cry escaping her, as his warm breath circled around her throat from behind like it wanted to clutch it.

Then she felt those hands slip around her sides, claws digging in so they almost felt like slices before she felt the enveloping warmth of them around her breasts. She looked

down to see dark grey skin with white knuckle bones protruding through them.

She couldn't see arms, the hands alone and disconnected from anything. She thought that might be because she didn't know what the rest of him looked like. She couldn't even begin to imagine what lay beneath his clothes.

One remained, flicking her nipple repeatedly as it moved back and forth, dulling her mind with need and want. The other started palming down her stomach, and her abdomen clenched in reaction, the hard peak of her clit throbbing with impatient waiting. Her vision was dazed as she stared down to watch, just as she noticed in her peripheral above that his bony head was still and watching her.

She wanted it to watch as his hands touched her.

A warm huff brushing over her neck from the front made her cry out once more, but louder this time. She frowned when she looked up through her lashes to see he hadn't come closer to do it.

More drops of her arousal floated right before his hand cupped her. A firm, calloused press of heat put pressure on her clit, sending relief through her. Reia needed the touch, wanted it so much that she undulated into the hand with needy and desperate movements.

A clawed finger flicked, sending a jolt through her clit to pierce straight inside her pussy. It clenched, created more liquid, and Reia shuddered. More. I want more. *She undulated into the hand, almost sighing in relief when a finger stroked through her folds.*

Another breath fanned against her chest, just as warm as before, but it felt too *real to her aching and sensitive senses. It felt too good.*

That is not a part of the dream, *she thought.*

Her eyes flung open when realisation dawned.

Reia found herself lying on her back in her bed with Orpheus above her in the dark. There was no light other

than his orbs, but they illuminated between them both just enough that she could barely see.

He was on his hands and knees, caging her in, as she heard him sniffing around her head. He'd never done this before, had never come into her room in the middle of the night.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice broken and raspy that had nothing to do with her grogginess.

She lifted her hands to press them against his chest. Delectable heat and firmness nearly made her groan, her body aching and disorientated from her dream.

Her *wet* dream… about him.

"There is a strange scent coming from you," he explained, his deep and gruff voice making her feel drunk after what she'd just experienced within her own mind. Her eyelids shuddered as a pant fell from her. "I've never smelt it from you."

Oh god, he can smell that I'm turned on. She squirmed beneath him, rubbing her thighs together at the pounding pressure in her clit, in her core.

"What is it?"

He lifted his head to sniff her arm, like that might be where the source was coming from, before he huffed and shook his head. His nose came down on her chest right above her heart.

Her back nearly arched off the bed when she felt his breath over one of her hardened nipples through the thin cloth of her gown. They were strained, itching for attention, and even just the minute amount of it from his breaths stroked them.

She covered her mouth with one of her hands to hide the strangled noise that came from her. Her eyes bowed in confusion and distress. It felt so good that she didn't want him to stop sniffing her.

I'm so fucking horny. She *wanted* him to sniff further, to sniff her all over and discover where the source was coming

from. It was a crazy thought.

She knew it must be strong with how wet she felt between the lips of her folds since she felt slippery all the way along the slit of her pussy. Rubbing her thighs together actually moved her clit side-to-side, and she had to stop herself from moaning and doing it again.

His touch in the bath had sparked something in her and now her body was *begging* for release, just as it had then. Except it was worse, her dream just the taste of her desires. It wasn't real, this was real, and she couldn't conjure the will to stop him even when he started lowering his head.

Her sense of reason was paralysed.

It should have been a terrifying nightmare to have his massive body caging her in against the bed. His horns should have made her think him a Demon, a devil, the monster he was supposed to be, but her mind knew they'd be the perfect things to hold onto when she was thrashing under the wave of lust. His pure white bony face should have been disturbing, but the glowing of his eyes soothed her, and she knew within his maw was a long and wet tongue that had once felt amazing slipping over her chest in the snowy forest of the surface above the Veil.

Heat emitted from him, and she felt it like curling waves as he drew the furs down to discover the source.

Reia squeaked when a spasm rippled from just above her pelvis all the way along her channel when his nose pressed against her pubic mound. He grabbed a thigh with one of his hands and pulled it to the side, his head twisting like he was trying to understand. It pressed directly against her clit once her legs were parted, and her hands shot down to stop him.

They halted in the air when a light growl came from him. Within the blink of an eye, his orbs changed to a deep purple, and her breath hitched.

"You are aroused," he growled, his head turning up to face her.

Her pussy clenched in reaction to the dark depth of his voice, and she felt so much liquid pooling that it dripped and leaked. She bit into her bottom lip to stop the moan that threatened to escape as her body tensed and shivered. She covered her mouth once more in shock when the ripples dancing along her eased.

Oh fuck, I almost came just by him saying that to me.

Her body felt over sensitive. His breath, his voice, the smell of his smoky mahogany and pine scent drowning her was making her feel insane. Her limbs were trembling. She'd lost her mind, but right then, with her body throbbing and aching, Reia didn't care.

"Smells delicious," he said in the rolling, growly tone as his hand, tipped with claws, gently ran down the inner thigh of the knee he bent. "I want to *taste.*"

Her heart stuttered in her chest when his head bent down, and his hand rolled the skirt of her dress up to bundle at her waist. He even lowered her tied strip of cloth she used as underwear with careful claws.

She didn't stop him, didn't even feel a single urge to try.

She didn't know if he truly understood what he was doing, but her breaths were so shallow and short that when he pressed his snout against her entire pussy, from clit to slitted entrance, and *breathed* her in, they cut off.

Then she let out a high-pitched cry when his tongue slipped from her puckered backside, that wasn't expecting the slippery organ, over the entrance of her core to collect every drop of her liquid cream, and then up through her folds until he heavily lashed her pounding clit.

Reia's mouth fell open as she used her hands in a poor attempt to stifle the sound of her cry, her back arching as her legs shook around his head. Her knee knocked one of his horns. She felt him grab it to once more rake his claws lightly down the inside of her thigh that sent another spasm to her channel, before pressing it down to the bed to pin it there.

His tongue felt long and slippery, and it folded as it curled around the top of her clit to circle it once. Then it moved down through her folds with his head twisted to allow him to as it just lightly dipped inside her. She spread her legs in welcome, desperately needing more.

It was too late to turn back.

Orpheus was there, licking her pussy in the dark, his purple eyes the only light, and Reia was adoring it. There was no point in turning back. She needed. She ached. She fucking wanted. A fever was burning in her.

Sink it inside me. She couldn't vocalise it, didn't think she could with how strained her squeaking breaths were as they tore her throat, but she willed it to him. *Inside me. I need it, anything. Please...*

She grasped one of her breasts, squeezing it firmly, when his tongue run up and through her again. Slow, but deliberate, he made sure his wide tongue delved into all the creases and spread her lips. His breath continued to huff over her, washing her in heat that tickled her delicately and made her ache for more.

The pressure she gave her breast was too much while the hand covering her mouth dug its nails into her cheeks. She had to fling both hands away from her body as it began to squeeze nothing. Reia gripped the bedding, tugging on it, when his tongue folded again as he circled around the flaps sheltering her clit.

"Ohhh!" she moaned, her legs bouncing as tension tore through her.

I'm coming. I'm fucking coming from his tongue!

A wet, squelching sound came from her channel as it filled with hot liquid. Her brows furrowed tightly as her mouth fell open, her back bowing as everything seized.

Bliss, euphoria, and a sense of floating swept through Reia as her orgasm shook her to her very being. Her legs shook, her abdomen clenched tightly.

Her mind felt hopelessly dazed even when she gently floated back to reality, her body jolting as his tongue continued to move. Her head fell to the side as she panted, trying to catch the breaths she'd lost.

She felt that his body shook and shuddered by him jingling the bed and her thigh with his hands when he swept his tongue over the entrance of her channel to lap it up once she was done.

"That is sweet." He lapped it again, and then again, finding the source of his interest. "More. *Give me more.*"

Her breath hitched when the tip of his tongue pressed inside to slowly spear her channel. Her clit ached so much that she'd feared if he lashed it again it would be so sensitive it'd pain her, but *this* pressure felt perfect. Wonderful even.

Her eyes drooped into half-casts as she tried to spread her thighs further in welcome. Deeper it pushed, and her walls contracted around it, happily fluttering to have his tongue there. He licked all around her inner walls like he wanted to sweep into every crevice to steal her taste.

Then she felt pressure.

"Hm?" It was a thoughtful sound that came from him as she felt him tonguing something small and thin.

Wait... is that my— His tongue pushed hard and broke something, sending a light pinch of pain through her channel.

"Eep!" Reia squealed.

Her legs lifted as his tongue, lubricated from his own salvia and the lingering wetness of her orgasm, allowed him to push all the way inside until she felt him hit her cervix and crumble against it. His jaws parted as the top one slipped over her pubic mound, one of his longest canine fangs grazing her sensitive clit before it ran through the curls of hair above the slit of her folds.

The pressure felt phenomenal, even if the pain tried to dilute it. She squirmed, unsure of how she truly felt as

goosebumps prickled over her flesh down her arms and legs. His tongue drew back a little, sending sparks of conflicting pain and pleasure through her before it thrust forward.

A moan broke from her, before he suddenly froze.

His eyes flashed red.

A vicious growl that was different from before thundered from him. She even heard the grinding of his hand against the bed and felt it tightening around her thigh, as claws dug in.

Oh shit, I'm totally dead!

Blood. He could smell it, could *taste* it, and it sent a shudder of unfathomable hunger through him.

The throbbing, painful, piercing grip of desire in his groin, which had felt remarkable to freely feel it in full strength and power, was replaced by something dark. The invisible grip of hands dug into his skull and squeezed his brain, beckoning for him to ease his hunger, to satisfy his craving of flesh.

He withdrew his tongue, bringing the taste of blood into his mouth to fully take it in. A snarl broke from his jaws as he opened them further. He leaned forward to hover over her abdomen, pinning her down by his hands on her thighs with the intention of digging his sharp fangs into her supple flesh. To eat.

The position strained his body, pressing his pants against his groin, and it sent a thrill through his entire body that

ruffled all of him, human, inhuman, his joints and bones. Desire pierced his hungry fog once more just long enough to give him thought.

White flashed into his orbs, diluting all colour completely. Fear tore through Orpheus. He sat up on his knees, his snarl cut short as he released her while wrapping his hands around his snout.

Now that he was in control enough to think, he was hiding the smell of blood with his own palms to stop himself from slipping back into a craze.

Reia scrambled away from him, no doubt understanding the dangers of his orbs turning red. However, they were white now, showing her his hunger had passed. *For now.*

“I hurt you,” he rasped, knowing she’d bled because he’d harmed her.

The smell of blood was light, only a few drops, but it had touched his tongue directly and sung through him.

He could still smell her desire, it was everywhere over his snout, as was the lingering taste of her orgasm and arousal just as prevalent on his tongue. His body hungered for that more than it did for her flesh, but his fear didn’t ease.

“N-no, it’s okay,” she answered in a small voice.

She clasped her hands to her chest, bringing her knees along with them like she was curling away from him. She didn’t smell of fear, which relieved him, and her breaths were just as short and shallow as before.

“But you are bleeding.” A whistling of a whimper rattled at the bottom of his lungs. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Was I too rough? Orpheus had been too excited, had been lost in the taste of her, the smell of her, at the feel of her around his tongue. *She was so soft inside.*

He knew he hadn’t been thinking straight, hadn’t being paying close enough attention to her delicate and fragile body when he’d been devouring the delicious taste of her honey. He’d been trying to go slowly, savouring it, but he knew he must have made a mistake.

“I think you broke my hymen.”

“Your what?” he gasped, tilting his head as he looked down towards her pelvis. “I *broke* you?”

Have humans gotten weaker over the eons? Dread crept through him. If he broke her, shouldn’t she be screaming and crying?

“What? No!” she laughed with a panicky tone, her eyes wide and stark. “You broke my hymen, like the thing that proves that I’ve never been touched by a man.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

All he was hearing was that he broke her, and he knew he’d hurt her by the taste of her blood.

“You... uh.” Her cheeks flushed a bright red. “You took my virginity with your tongue.”

“Your virginity?” Now that he understood. The first penetration done or received by man or woman. “Humans bleed when this happens?”

“Just the women! We have a piece of skin called a hymen that is broken.” Then she grumbled as she averted her gaze, “I can’t believe I have to explain this. I thought you would know this.”

He nearly growled as a flare of anger rose in his chest.

“Why would I know something like this about a human?”

“Because you asked for all your offerings to be pure!” she shouted as she curled her hands into tight fists. Her cheeks were unmistakably red, more so than he’d ever seen before.

She shouted at me. He couldn’t believe she would. Humans rarely showed their anger to him.

“Of disease.”

“Wait, what?” she quickly said, her voice breathy like a gasp.

Her gaze swiftly came to him. The tension in her fists faded along with the spike of anger he’d seen in her mirroring his own.

“Pure of disease, of sickness.” He tilted his head in confusion. “I didn’t want the humans to pass on those to me

that were going to die.”

“Oh, my God,” she gasped, her eyes trailing over the bed in thought and realisation. “We’ve always thought you meant pure of sex, like untouched virgins as your brides. We didn’t know if it was for sex, or because perhaps you could taste the impurity of a touched human. I didn’t understand why it would matter to something like you, but this makes so much more sense.”

Something... like me. She would never know, but her words hurt him terribly.

“Then… then are you not hurt?”

Her arousal had softened during their conversation, but he could still smell it. Orpheus wanted more. He’d been enjoying himself, awash in the taste of it, or her, hearing the sounds of her moans. Her body twitching and shivering due to his attention.

All of it coming from her *for* him, *because* of him.

“It hurt a little, but I’m okay now. The pain didn’t last long.”

Her cheeks reddened a little more, so easy for him to see and understand due to her snowy complexion.

Orpheus reached across the bed with the intention of stroking her cheek with a tender touch. She flinched, her shoulders turning inwards as she shied away.

He withdrew his hand from the air, knowing that whatever had caused her arousal had passed and she was no longer filled with desire. She didn’t want to continue, even though he would have been happy to remain where he’d been until eons passed and the world crumbled around them.

But it had happened once. Hope blossomed freely within him at the idea of it possibly happening again. *I tasted her, made her come.*

He would hold dear this memory for the rest of his life.

His vision returned to its usual blue as he crawled backwards off the bed.

“Sleep well, my *little doe*.”

Then he left her room, feeling a swell of tenderness and joy in his gut.

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I have to run, Reia thought, as she sprinted through the forest. *Don't look back, just keep going forward.*

She felt the teardrop jewel tapping against her forehead like a rhythm to keep her focused and calm. Her legs and lungs burned as exertion strained her muscles, but she continued forward, never daring to slow or to rest.

Placing her hand on the rough surface of a large boulder, she kicked her legs over it to jump and then pushed off to keep running. Trees whistled past her, blurring in the edges of her vision as debris filled wind, from leaves and dust, fluttered around her.

She didn't know how long she'd been running. An hour, maybe a little more?

Shrouded in a white cloak, gripping a dagger firmly in her hand, Reia ran through the darkness and gloom of the Veil. She refused to feel fear, hoping that the amulet and her faith in it would keep her safe.

I can make it, just keep running.

After their interlude of Orpheus having his fucking tongue inside her, Reia had sat on her bed panicking. Shame and embarrassment caused her blood to rush with adrenaline. She'd let him touch her, lick her, and her body had been *begging* for more. Even when he left, her body had been

thrumming with the hope he'd return and finish what they'd started.

And it had freaked the hell out of her.

Just as daylight was breaking, with her wrapped tightly in the fur nearly hyperventilating due to stress, she'd heard him leave.

Perhaps he thought she was asleep, but she knew he must have left to obtain her water like he'd promised. He wouldn't be gone long, maybe an hour or two, but Reia had started moving.

She'd dressed in her green gown, made sure her amulet circlet was firmly in place, grabbed a dagger, and jimmied the lock until the door opened. He probably thought locking it would be enough to keep her inside, but Reia had been barred inside her house in the village so many times that she'd taught herself how to break through them.

Then she bolted, heading toward what she thought was the way to the Veil's cliff edge so she could escape.

The smart thing to do would be to wait until he left to hunt, when he might truly be gone for hours. But after what they'd done…

Reia couldn't stay, refused to stay.

I am NOT *going to be one of those people that falls in love with their captor.* She couldn't remember what the word was – she wasn't thinking straight enough to. But Reia didn't want Stockholm Syndrome to be in her future.

I can't believe I came because of him.

Her breaths sawed through her lungs as she continued to sprint, thankful her bath was hiding her scent and she hadn't seemed to come across any Demons hunting her.

He's a Duskwalker! I let a Duskwalker lick me!

And she had *wanted* him to. Once more, shame crashed through her like a fist to her very soul. *I'm a pervert. People would laugh at me.* Not that she actually cared what anyone thought of her, a harbinger of bad omens. But she was using

anything she could to fuel her feet to keep moving like her heels were on fire.

Which they were, filled with cold as she lacked any shoes. None of the other offerings had feet that were the right size for her. Her feet weren't dainty, but they sure made her fast.

She groaned when a part of her wanted to turn back in hopes he might run his tongue over her again. *Okay, fine. I like his stupid tongue, and glowing eyes, and bony face, and his stupid smell. Why does he even smell so good anyway?* It was evil, calling for her to want to sin in its embrace.

She refused to turn back despite that she liked how sweet and thoughtful he had been. *He thought he hurt me.* And his reaction was so damn... adorable.

Guilt weighed on her, though. She was running away, fleeing, and she was sure that was going to hurt him. *Why should I care if he's lonely? He can find someone else to be with, someone that actually wants to live in the Veil.*

No one wanted to live in the Veil.

Who cares if I'm the first one who made trinkets with him? She continued to sprint. *Who cares if I'm the first one who had wanted to sit in his garden?* She had to stop her feet from slowing when she thought, *who cares if I'm the first one that had wanted him to touch them?*

And she knew that was the truth, simply because he hadn't understood about why she'd bled. She was the first human he'd taken the virginity of; Reia knew that deep down to her soul.

Am I really the first one who wanted him to touch them? Her eyes bowed in sadness for him. *But he's not so bad. He's gentle, and sweet, and he just wanted to make me happy.* She was sure he'd tried to do the same for all of them.

She knew he'd been taking humans for over a hundred years at least, maybe even two. Had no one else seen this in him?

His touch in the bath was filled with care, wanting to make sure they were protected within his home. The amulet, the salt circle, the dill trinkets. He wasn’t a beast trying to lure humans into feeding him.

Am... Am I running away because I like him? Was that why Reia had done this, something even she considered very, very stupid?

She sprinted harder, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. *I don’t want to like him. I don’t want to be excited by his touch, his voice. I... don’t want this.*

Trapped in the Veil, surrounded by a gloomy forest that was quite beautiful in its own way. It was filled with monsters that *would* eat her.

It didn’t matter that his home was warm and cosy. That it had a nice garden that actually had sunlight. That it had him in it.

Reia grunted when she tripped over something, feeling her amulet dislodging and pulling from her hair. It bounced away and she went to go to her hands and knees so she could get up.

She tripped again, losing her dagger this time, then she felt her foot tangled in something. She turned to dislodge her foot and ended up wrapping it further in whatever had her trapped.

Her brows drew together into a tight crease when she could see something wispy and white surrounding her foot. She yanked her foot and it yanked her back.

Leaning forward to pull it off, the substance stuck to her fingertips and her hand caught also. Stuck to whatever it was, she wrapped her other hand around her wrist to try to yank it away. It remained firm, keeping her to it by both her hand and foot.

What the hell is it? She relaxed her tugging and inspected the wispy, sticky substance. Her eyes widened as dread so cold crept through her it chilled her all the way down to her bones.

No. Nonono. She attempted to get to one foot, her body arched and bent as she used all her strength to pull away. *It's a spider's web, anything but a spider!*

Not much made Reia afraid, but there was always something creepy about a spider. She didn't care if they had cute little eyes and furry little paws. The fact they were small, could get into anything, and were usually venomous had always freaked her out.

She fell over and started clawing at the ground, her eyes searching around for a way to leverage herself, only to find more webbing was around her. She looked back, realising she'd only been running through this area covered in webbing for a few metres, but she'd been so distracted by her thoughts that she hadn't noticed.

I'm stuck! And now her body was bent awkwardly because even placing her hand against it had ensnared her. She hopelessly reached for the dagger and the amulet, but both were totally out of her reach.

Just as she was searching for a stick to wack them closer, the snapping of a *branch,* not a twig, caught her attention. Such an ominous sound was followed by the loud crunching of leaves getting closer and closer.

She desperately tugged to free herself while looking around her surroundings until her eyes fell on a black figure crawling closer in the white mist. Multiple spindly legs moved, and Reia's heart leapt to her throat.

Spider. That's a big spider.

And she wanted the fuck away from it.

Fear slithered under her skin when it emerged into the space she was in and was as gigantic and tall as Orpheus.

It's void, black-like skin told her it was a Demon. Its shape was so similar to that of spider, yet so completely different that it was off-putting.

It had eight arching legs, black and hairy, attached to a fat behind like that of a tarantula. Its upper segment was human-shaped, except backwards, arching its back so it

could see. Human elbows almost touched its forward facing back, the shoulders twisted so it could use them in front of itself. The head was arched back and upside down, and the breasts were pointing towards the sky due to its upturned body.

Three sets of human-shaped red eyes with no whites in them spanned its forehead, while its mouth didn't have lips and the exposed gums highlighted its many fangs.

"Well, what do I have here?" it hissed at her with a feminine pitch, snapping its jaw open and shut to make a chomping sound. "It *looks* human, but it doesn't *smell* human."

"Stay the hell away from me!" Reia yelled.

It crawled closer, each of its eight legs working at different times. It grinned, but it looked like a frown with its face upside down, and it was more grotesque the closer it came.

"Yes, definitely human." Its thin body made the skin around its rib bones hollow further as it took in quick breaths when it laughed. "A human has wandered into the Veil and is caught in my territory?" It came so close that the black hair dangling from on top of its head tickled her neck while it peered deeply at her. "I smell your fear, tasty morsel."

She attempted to punch it in the face, but it ducked away just in time. It snickered, the sound similar to a wheeze, and the hoarse sound of it eliciting a terrible wave of disgusted shivers.

"Oh, how much fun you'll be." It reached down with its twisted arms to obtain webbing from the pointed spinner at its backside. "I wonder how quickly I can make you scream and cry."

It didn't need to wait long.

A scream immediately broke from Reia, muffled by webbing when it started wrapping her in it. She struggled, but it was short lived as the non-sticky webbing was strong and wound around her tightly to force her still.

Once she was wrapped in a thin cocoon, it used its claws to cut her free from where she was trapped. Lifting her off the ground, hovering her underneath its body, it started walking away with her.

Reia eyed the amulet and dagger on the ground, her heart thundering and racing.

This was no ordinary Demon. This wasn't a weak one, but one who had eaten many humans. She wondered if the amulet would have done anything to protect her. But without it, she knew there was nothing to stop it from eating her.

A spider. Why did it have to be a spider? She couldn't think of a more terrifying combination than a Demon and a spider, and currently she was in the clutches of it.

It took her deeper into its web-covered territory before coming to an opening that had a large hammock-like spider's nest. It hovered above the ground, and it took her to the centre of it to lay her upon it.

Then it started climbing the trees, crawling to the canopy above until its human body dangled and made it the right way up.

"You are not as afraid as others." It closed its eyes as its body shuddered in delight. The hairs on its legs rose and vibrated, showing Reia just how ecstatic it was that it had her. "But it still smells delicious on you, little morsel." Its tongue came up to lick at its lipless face. "However, I desire a different emotion from you."

Reia's body ached in the tightness of her bounds. Her body bent in a way that wasn't natural as her hand remained stuck to her ankle.

It leaned down with its arms reaching forward to cup her face. She couldn't speak to it, her mouth covered by webbing, but her free nose allowed the pungent smell of rot and decaying bodies that came from it to churn her stomach with it so close.

It brushed its nose against her cheek in a stroke.

“Will you not be sad for me? I love the sour taste.”

Reia narrowed her eyes into a glare, refusing to give it anything it wanted. Its mouth opened and closed quickly, making that sharp snapping sound.

“No?” It snickered. “Is there no one you miss? No one you wish… to *see*?” Its voice became twisted and echoed before a shadow fell over its face.

Reia’s eyes widened when a ghost figure’s face fell over its own; a familiar one. *Mother?*

Blonde hair covered its own as a blue, singular pair, of eyes looked beseechingly into her own. The image was a perfect creation, looking exactly like the memories of her real mother.

“Why?” it asked her, her mother’s eyes bowing as her voice filled Reia’s ears. “Why did you bring the Demons on us?”

Her heart squeezed in her chest. She tried to shake her head, to tell it no. To tell *her* no.

“It’s all your fault.” Her mother’s voice made it convincing as Reia could see nothing else about the Demon. It was so close to her that it blocked out everything else. “If it wasn’t for you, we’d still be alive.”

No! Reia clenched her eyes shut, feeling tears collecting in her them. *It’s a Demon. It’s not my mother.*

“Why won’t you look at me, Sweetpea?”

Sweetpea. Only her parents called her that. *It’s not her. It can’t be her.* But how was this Demon able to conjure this? How did it know to use that very name?

“Can you not bear to look at me because of what you did?” Reia tried to squirm but gained no room in her trappings. “You killed us, Reia.”

My name? She opened her eyes to find her mother’s face, and it was filled with anguish and pain.

“You let them eat us. You brought them to our home by the will of your soul. You attract Demons like a bad omen.” *It’s… it’s not my fault.* It couldn’t be her fault. Being a

harbinger wasn’t real, it wasn’t true. It was only a label the scared gave her. “You killed us!”

A cry was wretched from her throat and sounded through her nose as tears began filling her eyes.

“You killed your baby brother!”

The face changed, a little boy, no older than three, came into view. With brown hair, green eyes, and a face covered in freckles, his face scrunched up as he wailed with little tears falling from his eyes.

“It hurwts, Wreia,” he blubbered. “Why didwn’t yew protwect me?”

I didn’t mean to! She didn’t mean to let them die, didn’t mean to do nothing. She’d heard their screams, heard their cries, heard them fighting until the sound of tearing, blood-splatters, and the suckling of blood and organs was heard.

“Pappa said for yew to always protwect me. But... But yew wlet dem eat me.”

Reia wanted to cover ears, like she had when she’d been a child, at his voice. Pain filled her chest and guilt clutched her throat. A sob came from her as tears began to track from her eyes and down her temples to roll into her hair.

“You were supposed to protect him!” her father roared, his face reddened with rage and anger as his face filtered in. His short, light brown beard tickled her nose as he spoke over her. “Instead, you brought us death! Your mother, your brother, me. We died because of you.”

I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry!

“Help us!” her mother screamed as her face broke through.

“Wreia!” Caleb cried.

“I wish you were never born!” her father yelled.

“It hurwts!”

Their faces and voices flittered in, over and over, reaching into the depths of her anguish and memories of that night. A night when she had not been afraid, but she’d felt the loss of them ever since.

“Why didn’t you love us?” her mother asked with a voice filled with tears.

But I did! Her thrashing increased. *I loved them so much. It’s all my fault. They’re dead because of me. I killed them.*

And Reia had paid the price of that for the rest of her life. As an outcast. A shame. A thing to be terrified of. Alone. So alone.

She shut her eyes as she cried, fear giving away to the overwhelming grief and loss and pain. *I miss them all so much.*

She’d never gotten to play with her cute baby brother again outside in the spring where flowers would grow in their yard or watch him grow from a cute young boy into a handsome man. Their home had been secluded in the dangerous forest, but her family had lived there for generations safe and unharmed.

Until Reia came along.

I killed them!

She felt the sharpness of fangs scraping across her skin as a jaw spread over her face, filling her senses with foul breath, but she couldn’t open her eyes or stop crying.

I want my family. I want to hold my brother again.

She missed her mother’s cooking and cuddles, her father’s bedtime stories filled with fantasy and hope. The laughter her family shared around the fireplace. She missed everything.

Why did this have to happen to me?!

The stench was suddenly gone before a cracking thud of multiple branches being broken filled her ears. The sound forced her eyes open, and through teary eyes she saw a black figure with a white face and horns attacking the giant spider.

But Reia couldn’t stop crying at her loss and doubt to feel relief, or even worry that Orpheus found her.

Orpheus gave a bellowing roar when he saw the arachnid Demon with her jaws widening around Reia’s head. He lunged, his vision a crimson red.

Shoving his entire body with the use of his shoulder into her meaty behind segment, both of them went tumbling to the other side of her nest. Screeching, her body hit against the thick trunk of a tree while Orpheus found himself on the other side of Reia.

The silk hammock wasn’t sticky and allowed Orpheus to freely crawl around it on his hands and back paws. It was also strong enough to hold both their heavy weights as it bounced them.

He was in his more animalistic form, his legs wolven-shaped with long fur covering his upper torso while the rest of him was covered in more deer-like fur, as well as a tail. Bones protruded from his body in sharp angles, while fish sail fins hung from his back, elbows, and the back of his calves in tall arches.

His head always remained the same, never changing.

He turned to the crying human, his head twisting to see her tears when he’d never seen them from her before.

As he was raising his claws to cut the cocoon surrounding her, a coil of spun rope was leashed around his throat and horns and yanked him backward.

“It is my dinner, Mavka,” the arachnid Demon hissed, dragging Orpheus backwards until he managed to use his claws to cut himself free.

He turned to her as he crawled around on all fours. He wanted to free Reia, but he understood he had to fight the Demon first.

“Mine,” Orpheus growled in answer, his jaws opening to show the length and sharpness of his fangs in warning and threat.

How close he’d come to losing Reia was gut-twisting.

When he’d returned to his home after fetching her water, elated with his memories of her from earlier, a pain had pierced his heart when he knew she was gone.

Hurt and rage had caused those invisible squeezing hands to grip his brain within his skull so tightly he’d instantly morphed to his more agitated state right in the middle of his home.

He’d barely been able to shove himself through the door, hearing it groan and creak under pressure as he launched himself outside. Following her scent, the feeling of a hunt, of his hunger being satisfied at the end of it, quickened his long strides.

His want to protect her fell away to the excitement of the chase and the desire to consume flesh and blood. If Orpheus had been the one to catch her, had he found her running, he doubted she would have lived past his tackle filled with swiping claws and snapping fangs.

But her elderberry and rose scent had vanished from the ground when he found only the amulet and dagger she’d taken.

Rage that his prey was taken by another dipped the squishy flesh of his brain while fear that Reia would be gone also clutched his throat.

His mind wasn’t sound. His thoughts were muddled between his want to consume and the returning pressure of wanting to protect, and they tugged on him from both sides.

Orpheus was lost to the chaos within.

His sweet memories of her that he’d never obtained from another offering was the only seam within him that wasn’t

allowing his hunger to win. If she had been like the others, he wouldn’t have tried to free her from her cocoon. He would have bitten into her before the arachnid Demon even had the chance to leash a whip around his throat.

She would have been trying to fight for the remaining parts of the corpse as Orpheus fell into hunger, eating while fighting for his meal.

But the fleeting memories of her smile, her eyes on him, and her trinket hanging above his bed, fought the gripping hands within his skull. The taste of her skin, her arousal, made his mouth salivate for that aroma just as much as blood. And her pretty voice saying his name, her laughter, and her moans of pleasure as she came, eased the tension in his muscles.

He hungered, but his want to protect soared when he found her about to be eaten by another.

“The human was in my territory,” she hissed, her lipless face contorting into fury as her mouth opened to reveal her own fangs. “I stay out of your home, Mavka.”

Orpheus backed up to be above Reia while the Demon began to walk backwards up the side of the tree so she could hang from above. It made her backwards body appear upright, and her black hair fell over her shoulders rather than from the top of her head.

“Do not touch!” he roared.

“Oh?” Her three sets of red eyes widened, before she began to give a wheezing snicker. “Is it one of your little playthings?” She crawled over the web-covered canopy above, staying just out of reach of him unless he jumped. He would have if it wasn’t for the fact he could land on top of Reia when he came back down. “How pitiful. How long will it be before you eat this one?”

Agony swirled around his heart as a light whine rattled the bottom of his lungs.

“No,” he demanded.

He did *not* want Reia to end up like the others.

“I can see how much you don’t want to,” she snickered, moving above him until he had to turn around to face her. “It ran from you. It *hates* you.”

Orpheus growled in answer, his anger spiking, but it was tangled with sadness. She was right. Reia had run away from Orpheus, just like many others.

He’d felt this before, this cold taste of sadness. Orpheus becoming fond of a human only for it to leave because of its disgust in him. *Is Reia the same?* Would things end up as they did long ago?

“It left you, Mavka.” Her head twisted to look down towards Reia’s face. “I see its memories. It was always planning to leave you.” The Demon turned her grinning face back to Orpheus, its red eyes bowing with nasty humour. “You will not be able to keep it.”

That swirl of sadness took charge, and he was filled with hopelessness like a constant ache in his heart that he’d held for eons. His vision turned to such a deep blue that it made everything appear darker and lonelier, like a veil had been laid over his face.

“It will end up like *her.*”

His sight turned down to Reia to find her green eyes were still tear-filled but wide as she stared up at him. Orpheus shuddered as he reached up to the top of his head to dig his claws in. It felt as though his skull was cracking under the pressure of his mind, the Demon reaching into his deepest uncertainties, doubts, and fears.

She will never want me.

Why was Orpheus bent on trying to find a companion, even a bride, when it always ended in tragedy? The humans, *this* human, would never grow fond of him. No matter what he did, what he tried, he would lose them one way or another.

“I sense your guilt.” The Demon’s voice turned softer. There was almost a comforting, caring, hint to it, like she cared for Orpheus despite it being nothing more than a cruel

manipulation to get what she wanted. He knew this, but it was hard to ignore for it was the first time *anything* had truly spoken so kindly towards him. “You do not want to eat them. You do not want to harm them, but you cannot stop from spilling their blood.”

Faces began to flicker over the Demon’s, showing him each human he’d lost over the last hundred and eighty years, with an additional one filtering between each of them. That one face, repeating when the others didn’t, was to ensure he felt overwhelmed in loss, in pain.

Gone. All of them gone. All of them lost... because of him. Dead because of his actions, because he brought them here. *Gone.*

“This human will be no different.” She pointed a claw at Reia. “Why bear the memory of you eating it?” Then she dared to come a little closer, her voice even gentler. “Give it to me. I will punish it for leaving you. I will take that guilt away so you may try again.”

Red flared in his vision, bright and as dangerous as ever.

“*No!*” he roared, making her flinch back.

She was trying to get into his head, trying to latch onto the tethers of his pain to have her meal. She was the Arachnid Demon of Sorrow.

Orpheus wouldn’t allow it!

He spun to Reia below him and slashed his claws. Her cocoon split apart, leaving only a few strands that he tore away carefully with his other hand.

“She is mine!” He jumped forward, away from Reia, to grab a hold of one of the dangling arms of the Demon.

They both fell with the spider on top of him before they rolled over the hammock. It bounced, followed by the vibrations that came from where Reia was as she moved now that she was free.

The Demon shrieked when he ripped his claws into the back of her human torso before she scuttled away from him on her eight legs. Purple blood oozed from her in heavy

drops as she sprinted forward with her claws bared to attack him.

A spike swiftly extruded from where her spinnerets were and she curled her body, raising on four back legs as the four front lifted around him as she tackled.

The spike stabbed into his side, and he felt the cold rush of a liquid enter his body.

Despite her intentions, she placed herself around him where Orpheus was able to open his mouth and place it where her spider segment met the human-like part. He bit, his fangs slicing deeply, while thrashing beneath her to rip his claws into any part of flesh he could.

He cared not for his own pain she attempted to inflict.

She screeched, running her own claws down his chest, before he managed to grab her neck with one hand as his pawed feet pressed against her spider behind. He started pulling, gnawing his teeth at the same time.

“It hurts!” she screamed. “Stop! It hurts!”

Foul-tasting, rich blood entered his mouth, but he refused to stop. He refused to stop until he’d chomped his way enough through the tough section between human and spider, until he was able to push her lower half away while pulling her upper body.

The wet sound of skin and muscles tearing filled his ears as he tore her in half and severed her body.

He threw the pieces away from him, huffing deeply as he got back to his hands and paws.

The eight legs twitched in the air as her spider half lay on its side, wriggling and contorting. The human-like half used its hands to crawl around as she cried and gargled, life slowly fading from her. Heaving with terrible sounding wheezes, purple blood stained the nest as she moved around.

Then the top half slumped forward, bleeding out from her ripped torso as blood dribbled from her teeth.

A maelstrom of emotions swirled like a cyclone inside Orpheus. He shuddered and shook, as pain from his injuries flared through him at almost the same intensity.

And Reia was gone.

Red flared deeper in his vision, and he leapt in the direction she'd gone. *Chasing* her. *Hunting* her scent.

Mine! She was his human! His offering! His to touch, his to see, his to ***eat.***

He was inhuman. He could never be human. So why would a human ever want him? *But I want her.* Every kind of hunger inside him wanted her. His desire, his loneliness, his need for flesh and blood.

He was a monster. They'd all called him one. He was a nightmare to them.

Her scent grew stronger as he got closer and the sound of leaves crunching under quick, but light, footsteps told him she was running.

Orpheus gave a bellowing roar with parted fangs, the chase sending an electric thrill and excitement through him. Those hands squeezed his brain, and he panted. His vision dazing as it pulsated in and out.

He was so close he could hear her gasp at his roar, knowing he must be coming upon her. He was her death, her doom.

Then he saw her. Reia stopped and turned to him just in time for him to lunge at her.

She knocked against the ground, but her halt had stopped his claws from ripping into her, instead they found air around her back. His jaw clanked and clicked as he widened it swiftly, his head backing up to make room as he hovered above her.

Just as he dived his head forward to sink his fangs around her head for a quick strike, she ducked it forward at the same time, causing him to miss her. A crackling, wet snarl was loud even to his own hears.

“Orpheus!” she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck to bury her face against his monstrous, fur-covered chest.

He froze. His name and her tight hug burst through the fog that clouded his mind from the chase.

“I’m sorry!” She began to sob, the salt of her tears filling his sense of smell as she heaved her chest against him. Her nails dug through the long fur around his shoulders as they embedded into his flesh. “T-thank you so much for saving me.”

He didn’t know what to do. His emotions were still too chaotic, his thoughts still uncontrolled. He could still attack her. He could still hurt her.

I almost ate her. A part of him still wanted to.

“Reia,” he warned as he placed his hand around her shoulder to pull her away from him. He needed space to calm down. He was still in a highly agitated state.

She shook her head while squeezing him tighter.

“I’m so sorry. I was so stupid. I sh-shouldn’t have left.”

His head shot to the side when he heard the snap of a thin branch on the ground.

We need to leave. Demons would fall upon this area soon at the smell of the arachnid Demon’s blood – and he currently had a human in its vicinity.

“We have to leave,” he told her, trying to get to his hands and paws to get her to let go. Then he stood, able to stand on his pawed feet alone even though that bent his body so that his arms hung forward.

She continued to cling to him until she was dangling in the air, before slipping her legs around his waist to stay attached.

He heard more rustling and knew they were running out of time. Orpheus wrapped one arm around her securely and began to run, occasionally dipping forward to balance himself with his free hand.

His eyes were a diluted red, fear for her safety making it appear whiter than normal. *She isn’t wearing the amulet.*

He raced for their home, needing to get her within the protective salt circle there. He needed her safe.

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Reia sobbed as Orpheus carried her through the forest.

She knew they were going fast by the cold chill of the air cutting through her skin, but the warmth he emitted kept the shivers at bay. She could hear the rustling of movement beside them, as if something, or multiple somethings, were following them.

Orpheus snarled before he jumped sideways with the sharp, clipping sound of his jaws snapping around air. A warning. He knew they were being followed as much as she did.

“Give us the human, Mavka.” She heard from her left.

“*Feed* us!” This time it came from the right, a different voice telling her it was a second.

He ran faster than they could keep up, and they quickly fell behind.

She couldn’t stop crying, couldn’t stop clinging to him, not daring to let him go or peek her head up to see the Demons despite not being afraid. She trusted him. Trusted he would protect her.

She didn’t know how long he’d been running for, but the only reason they separated was because his legs crumbled, and they fell sideways to the ground. A gasp tore through

her, and her arms loosened from shock when she thudded against the dirt.

He'd tried to shield her by wrapping his massive hand around her head when they hit the ground, but she bounced away from him after they fell.

"Orpheus?" she asked through her tears, getting to her hands and knees when she saw he was trying to do the same.

He seemed weak as his arms shook before they collapsed.

What's wrong with him?

"Get... inside the circle." He pointed forward to show her they were almost inside it.

She could feel the wet tracks of her tears drying against her skin as they stung slightly from the salt of them. She wanted nothing more than to be inside the circle, to feel sheltered by it, but Reia ran over to him when it seemed he couldn't get to his feet as he tried with all his might to slowly crawl forward.

"What's wrong with you?" She grabbed his wrist and tugged on him so he could get closer.

"Venom," he grated.

Her heart clenched in her chest as more tears began to pool and fall in heavy drops. *It's all my fault.* He was hurt because of her. *I shouldn't have run.*

"Are you going to die?" she cried, yanking on him with all her strength only to make him slip a few inches forward.

Am I going to be the reason he is killed? Just like with her family? Reia felt pain tug on her heartstrings, not wanting Orpheus die more than anything. He'd been nice to her; he didn't deserve this. She couldn't lose anyone else. She couldn't lose someone else she... she cared for.

She didn't even think about the fact she'd die without him and his protection. Only the worry for his life mattered to her at that moment. She tugged him again to bring him closer towards the house.

She knew the Demons would try to eat him if he stayed outside the circle, knew they ate each other just as much as humans and animals.

“No,” he rasped, helping her to drag him forward one last time, right in front of the salt circle, before he collapsed. “Sleeeeep.”

His orbs slowly faded black to signify they were ‘closed’.

The fact he said he’d only be asleep reassured her, but he was so damn heavy as a limp form. Her feet slipped on the ground as she pulled him across it until his arm was over the salt circle, then a few seconds later his head, then his torso as she continued to drag him little-by-little.

Fear shot through her when a black figure dropped to the dirt behind them. There was no time for her to be sad, not when it started stalking closer on its three-toed feet. It had the body of a bird with small, flightless wings flapping as it dipped itself. Its head was near human-shaped with a wide maw of fangs.

Oh shit, oh fuck! Reia yanked harder and faster, inch-by-inch bringing Orpheus past the salt circle. *Almost there, almost there!*

It went to bare its three-toed foot on his leg just as she got the rest of him through. She fell back, her chest rising and falling in rapid breaths as she looked up at the Demon on the other side.

“I smell your fear.” It licked its lips with a long purple tongue, partially licking the rest of its face as well. “Afraid to die, tasty human?”

But Reia wasn’t afraid for herself, she was afraid for Orpheus who was unconscious.

“Fuck you!” she shouted, grabbing a stone from the ground and launching it at the Demon’s face.

Its head shunted back, right as another Demon ran straight for her from the right and crashed into an invisible wall. It huffed, disorientated, before it fell to the side in a daze.

The first one gave a bird-like cry, wailing, before it stepped forward while lowering its body into a more stalking position.

It stepped through the circle!

Her eyes widened, and she scrambled back as it stepped on top of Orpheus' leg. She turned her eyes down to the circle to see she had disturbed it there by dragging his body across and, in doing so, had granted it access.

Standing on his back, it flapped its wings at her.

"I'll eat you first, and then the Mavka!" It gave a loud squawk before leaping for her, and Reia scrambled to her feet.

She saw another, smaller Demon, run headfirst into the salt circle from the left. It huffed and then clawed at it, making animalistic noises as though it didn't have any humanity in it.

Sprinting for the house, she made it onto the porch before the Demon could reach her. It screeched, flapping its wings uselessly, before it jumped and bashed into the barrier that ran across the steps. With her back pressed against the door, her eyes snapped to the trinkets hanging on each corner of the porch that ran the entire length of this wall of the house.

"Smart, tasty human," it complimented. "But how long until we get inside with him gone?"

Its gaze fell to Orpheus still lying helpless on the ground. The other Demons hadn't figured out the weak spot yet and were smacking into the invisible barrier. Its red eyes drifted over the other Demons before it turned for Orpheus.

Reia rushed inside the house.

A weapon, I need a weapon! She ran for the dining table and had to partially jump to reach to the middle to grab a dagger.

When she held it, she couldn't help thinking it felt rather small in her hand. After seeing two Demons up close, one so large it mirrored the Duskwalker's daunting height and the

other bird-like one, similar to her own, she couldn’t help thinking she’d been foolish to believe she could have protected herself with a measly dagger.

He said he had a sword in his room. She threw the dagger onto the table and bolted for his sleeping area.

Without hesitation, she flung open the door. She flinched at what she saw as a billow of his comforting scent wafted over her. It looked… normal.

There was a large bed that could have perfectly fit two of him against the back wall in the centre with two side tables placed on either side of it. On the ground were furs, while more had been sewn together to create drapes that hung from the side on a rail across the long window to block out the light. There was a wardrobe and a chest of drawers against the wall opposite the window.

She didn’t know what she’d been expecting. Maybe a nest of branches with furs in the middle to cushion it, but it was like a normal bedroom.

Her eyes saw something glittering in the corner. She darted for the multiple swords she saw and grabbed one that appeared to be a short sword since she figured she’d be better at wielding it than the others.

Reia then ran back outside, choking out a cry when she saw the Demon bite into Orpheus’ side. It took a chunk of him as she screamed and swung her sword sideways.

It jumped, flapping its wings to dodge her. She chased it around the yard, carelessly swinging her sword any way she could to attack it. It squeaked and squawked as it backed up, jumping to swoop forward before dodging again. She refused to give it any room as she attacked without any skill or training whatsoever.

Its back met the invisible barrier, instantly halting its progress, and it allowed her the opening she needed to slice deeply into its side. It wailed, writhing desperately to be free, but the pressure of the wall and her sword kept it from moving as she began to hack into it. Over and over, Reia

swung. The blade dug into its side again, then its shoulder, then its wing as it tried to shield itself.

Only when it was wheezing on the ground did she start stabbing it from above until it was lifeless. Giving a war cry, she stabbed it through the head to make sure it stayed dead since she didn’t know if it would heal or not.

It oozed putrid, acidic-smelling blood, and she was covered in it.

Her hands trembled at what she had done, but she couldn’t allow her trauma to settle.

Another Demon had flittered to the edge of the salt circle. It was small, having only two arms that it used to walk, and its form was disgusting as it had no torso or legs.

Still gripping the sword, she sprinted for Orpheus and dragged him towards the house, needing to get him inside where he would be safe, where they both could be safe. She knew Orpheus was bleeding heavily due to the trail of blood behind him.

The Demons were moving, but the medium-sized one was crawling around the circle with determination, sniffing along the ground as it tried to figure out a way in. It was more dog-shaped than anything, its human arms and legs bent like that of an animal with a stout muzzle on its face.

She didn’t even know it had found the weak spot in the barrier until it grabbed her around the ankle and yanked as she was dragging Orpheus up the porch steps.

Claws cut into her calf, and she swung as it turned her around. The sword embedded into its side, making it yelp and jump back.

She knew she had to fight it before she could get Orpheus inside.

Limping, Reia walked in a circle as it stalked her. The Demon seemed to wait to attack, which made it all the more terrifying. Was it sentient enough to think to corner her? It didn’t say anything to her, but it was barking and frothing at

the mouth. Its red eyes were riveted to her, unwilling to remove them from its prey.

It jumped forward to tackle her. She stabbed upwards at the same time and pushed the sword through its chest in one go. It clawed her shoulder before yelping once more.

It whined and tore at its chest in pain. When she sprinted forward to attack, it whined louder and bolted away with its tail between its legs. She almost wanted to laugh. The Demon was afraid of *her,* of her sharp, pointy blade.

She went back to Orpheus, dragging him up the stairs slowly, only having to stop occasionally to present her sword to the injured Demon before it scuttled away.

It didn't want to die, but it clearly wanted her as it teetered on the edge of the porch steps.

She would have rested at the top of the stairs, knowing he was safe, but she thought if she stopped moving she'd permanently collapse. Reia dragged him, little-by-little, all the way to his room.

"Why are you so damn heavy!" she yelled as she tried to push him onto his bed.

After multiple attempts, she managed to hook him on enough that she could throw each of his limbs onto the mattress. He lay on his stomach, partially on his side, but he was finally there – a place where he could rest.

"This has been the most stressful day of my life."

She sat on the ground with her knees to her chest, facing his bed with fingertips digging into her forehead.

For a little while, Reia sat there, feeling the burning in her tired legs and arms as she tried to calm her breathing. It took her a long time to notice the stench of Demon blood on her, and she hissed in a breath when she touched her shoulder to examine her wound.

She looked at her blood on her fingertips, worried that she'd gotten Demon blood in her wound and it would become infected.

We almost died.

She wanted to wash away the smell and evidence of what she'd just been through. Reia headed for the dining table where she'd seen the large bucket of water he'd obtained for her.

After she grabbed a smaller bucket and dipped it inside to fill it, she carried it to the washroom, peeling her blood-stained gown away from where it grotesquely clung to her skin, the urge to dry-retch heaving her diaphragm. Sitting inside the tub, she used a cloth to wipe down her naked body, dipping it inside the water before wringing it clear.

It took her a long while to clean her body enough that she was satisfied, rubbing the oil Orpheus usually used on her to help wash her skin. It soaked into her flesh, helping to erase the smell. She knew she had just wiped away Orpheus' spell, but she didn't care.

She hoped that she could do the spell herself, that maybe he lied to her and had just wanted to touch her. Sympathy at the thought sailed through her; that perhaps he had just wanted to touch because he felt alone.

Guilt also clutched her throat heavily, refusing to ease or lift away. She'd fled, and now he was injured and forced into a sleep state.

Why did I even run away? H-he's really not that bad.

Reia's cries echoed against the walls as she wiped at her skin with the oil. This had been a traumatic day, for anyone, but especially someone who had never wanted to be placed in this position to begin with.

I'm so freaking stupid.

Her tears didn't stop as she tore one of the gowns to bandage her ankle and shoulder before she grabbed another bucket of water, leaving very little behind, so she could take it to him.

Placing the bucket and cloth on the ground, she cut away his shirt with a dagger, thankful he hadn't been wearing his thick jacket which would have been harder to cut through.

Bit by bit, as she sliced the long-sleeved shirt from his torso, she revealed his body. Maybe, in the beginning, she would have been disturbed by what she saw, but her mind barely cared about their differences as she searched for his wounds so she could clean and bandage them.

He was covered in dark-grey skin from the tips of his fingers to the bottom of his bicep, where short, black, deer-like fur sprouted through his skin, growing in length to be like that of a wolf's coat around his shoulders, upper back, chest, and neck. His chest was broad and wide, the deer-like fur coming back right above the curves of his pectoral muscles and black nipples. Then it became dark-grey skin once more, spreading over a very human shaped abdomen and hips, his waist tucking in a little more than normal.

More short fur was present in the centre of his stomach in a strip from his chest, over his navel and then to his hips where it grew longer before disappearing behind his pants.

His white rib bones were exposed and outside his flesh rather than hidden underneath it like hers. They framed his chest before circling around to his back where she could also see each vertebra of his spine.

However, fish-like sail fins hung loosely from the back of his arms to his elbows, covering them in a spike that dangled when it was bent. They also partially came from his spine segments, running in a dipping row that made it appear like he had six fins on his back over the top of his spine bones. The first one was shorter than the second which was the longest, before they grew smaller down his back.

Other than the white protruding bone of his spine, his lower back looked human-shaped.

He was different, very different, and it was no wonder he'd always hidden behind clothing around her and other humans when he walked to the villages.

She immediately got to work on the bite chunk on his side, shoving her hand underneath him to wrap his torso. It

also helped to cover the hole she could see on his other side where the spider Demon must have stabbed him with its venom. The last wound was over his chest, blood seeping through his fur from claw marks, and she wrapped her makeshift bandages around his shoulder and chest to keep it in place.

She wiped him down as best as she could to get rid of the blood. Some of it smelled foul, but most of it smelled like him with a metallic tang to it.

Once she was done, Reia then washed her hands and left him be, wishing he wasn't lying on the furs so she could cover him.

She was exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

Lying down in her bed, she tried her hardest to sleep. It was fitful and eventually disturbed by the scraping of claws raking across the outside of the house, followed by the thumping of footsteps over the top of it.

"We smell you in there, human." She heard huffing near the window and clenched her eyes shut, pulling the blanket further over her head to hide. "Come out, come out, wherever you areee."

The slurp of a tongue followed, before it scraped its claws across the outside wall again.

"You only have until the protection wears off," a different one snickered. "How long until we have you?"

Reia tried not to be afraid, but as more came, crawling over the house and speaking to her, telling her just how tasty she smelled, how much fun they were going to have pulling out her entrails, the more she felt it seeping into her heart.

She spent the first night alone, trying her hardest to sleep and only getting a few winks. When day broke, she shakily made trinkets while hearing the laughter and threats getting more persistent. Howls, moans, wails, and the rattling of bones filled in the rest of the silence.

More were coming by the hour. She knew there must be a small swarm of them outside the timber walls.

Without removing the old ones but seeing they were starting to wither from when he'd placed them there, Reia hung two of them in the corners of the porch, but she refused to get too close to the outside. She didn't know where he placed the others, but she had a feeling it was on the other side of the house, and she refused to go past the porch to place them there.

There had been no food inside, but she drank the little water she had remaining. Then Reia curled up in her bed, covering her head with the furs while clutching the sword she'd used to protect Orpheus outside.

"The smell of human is so fresh, so inviting. Tearing your skin will feel *good.* Will you scream?"

They always hovered around the room she was in, and she knew, without a doubt, that Orpheus hadn't lied. His spell was gone, and it allowed them to smell her. If she was in her bedroom, they seemed to hover there. If she was in the kitchen or washroom, they followed.

She wanted to hide from the Demons, to feel safe. Only one solution came to mind.

Reia didn't hesitate.

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Orpheus woke with a start. His vision lightened so he could see as he lay almost flat on his stomach.

Where am I? He looked around and immediately knew he was in his sleeping room at the familiar scenery. *What happened?* He doubted he'd have the answer to that just by simply thinking it.

White entered his vision as his muscles tensed.

Where's Reia?

He didn't know how he got here, or why he was asleep. All he knew was that she'd run away before. *Did she leave while I was asleep?*

Something stirred underneath his arm and side, stopping him from leaping to his feet to find her. He lifted his arm to look underneath it, just as the form wiggled and turned to its back when he gave it room.

"Reia?" he asked, yellow entering his vision as confusion swept through him.

He could see she'd been clutching a sword with both hands as it lay on the bed in front of her. She had been resting with him, under him and the furs, while he'd been on top of them. He couldn't understand why.

"You're finally awake," she stated softly, her voice crackling and broken. "You've been asleep for two days."

That long? But that still didn’t answer the many other questions he had.

“Why...” he started, unsure if he wanted to ask the question he had in case it made her leave. She felt so warm, so soft beside him. “Why are you lying with me?”

She was looking up at him while he was leaning around her on his hand on the other side of her, just propping himself up enough to give her space. He almost wanted to lie back down so she couldn’t escape.

“The Demons have been scratching at the walls and trying to get inside,” she told him. He noticed she looked pale, had dark smudges under her eyes, and her usually glossy hair was a nest of knots. “They could smell me. I-I thought it would help if I lay under you to hide my scent, like how you did when you brought me here under your cloak.” Then her eyes flickered around the room, almost as if she couldn’t look at him, as she said, “And I felt safer next to you.”

She feels safe with me? Her words brought to light the tapping he could hear on his window. The drapes that were usually left open, were closed, and he knew she must have shut them so she didn’t have to look at the Demons crawling around the outside of the house.

He could hear and smell many, but they were scattered rather than bearing down around his room. She had been right. She’d hidden the worst of her scent by using his body to shield her.

“How did I get here?” The last thing he remembered was collapsing on the other side of the salt circle.

“I brought you here.” She let go of the sword and turned to him more. “And you are so fucking heavy, by the way. It took me forever.”

Orpheus chuckled, knowing she was absolutely right. She was a little human woman. She must have dragged him across the ground since he doubted she’d been able to carry him. The fact she had at all was amazing.

His earlier chaotic emotions and mind were calm after having been asleep for so long, but it didn’t stop his disappointment that she’d run. He’d lost his flare of hope. However, her lying next to him, against him, saying she felt safe with him, brought joy and relief.

“Are you okay?” she asked while reaching forward to touch his chest.

Orpheus’ eyes blackened when he felt her ruffling the fur over the top part of his chest. The sensation of the feather light touches from her fingertips caressing the protruding bones of his ribcage sent a vibration of pleasure through him.

His vision snapped back open to white. He looked down, seeing she was touching his body directly and backed up and away from her.

“My clothing?” He looked further down to see he still had his trousers on, but he hadn’t been in the presence of a human without shielding his body for eons. It disturbed and horrified them to know what he looked like.

Her hand slapped against her chest when she retreated it.

“You were hurt. I bandaged you and washed the blood I could from you.”

He touched his chest where he could see the wrapping strips of cloth before his hand slipped down his torso where the rest of them were.

She’d seen my body. And she had still chosen to lie beside him and regarded him as safe. He also couldn’t smell fear from her, even now when she slipped her gaze over it.

She wasn’t scuttling to get away. She didn’t even look bothered. She just continued to lie there under the furs.

His head tilted when he saw the exposed ridge on top of her shoulder, her gown and the furs low enough to reveal it. It looked as though she had bandages over her own body.

He reached forward, moving the furs and the gown more to see she did. A light growl vibrated in his chest.

“*You’re hurt.*” His vision flared red as the fire of anger clutched his gut. “I should have made the Arachnid of Sorrows’ death more painful.”

She’d always left his territory alone because he never entered hers. It was one of the many silent truces he had with the more intelligent Demons that surrounded his home. They never entered his lands, even if they could smell he had a human.

Reia covered her shoulder with her hand.

“I-I didn’t get this from the spider one.”

“A *different* Demon hurt you?” More rage bubbled, a desire to maim and hurt those that had dared touch what was *his.*

His fins, usually helped to stay down by his clothing, extended when they hardened, no longer being loose flaps. His fur raised to puff out, no doubt making him look larger and more feral.

“I got it trying to protect you,” she grumbled, averting her gaze, most likely from his obvious seething as it shook him.

Everything flopped suddenly.

“Protect me?” His sight moved to the sword behind her, seeing the blade had the remnants of dried Demon blood on it.

“I broke the salt circle when I dragged you inside it and two of them followed.”

“I told you to get inside!”

“I-I couldn’t just leave you out there,” she stuttered, her face contorting into a deep frown. “They were going to eat you! I couldn’t just let you to die.”

He was about to push more thoughts from his mind to berate her, to tell her of the dangers she’d brought to herself, but they never finished forming into a projected voice. Realisation dawned.

She didn’t want me to die. She risked her life to save me. Him! A Duskwalker. Other offerings had tried to kill him, and

yet Reia had gone out of her way, allowed herself to be hurt, to save him.

He huffed, unable to quell the tenderness that radiated in his chest and around his heart. *Does she care for me?*

Could it be possible?

He ripped back the fur lying over her and sniffed her shoulder to find the light metallic scent of her wound. Then he sniffed around her body, forcing her to let him as he tried to search for anymore. He growled when he reached her ankle, finding the smell there as well as a bandage.

“Never again,” he growled at her. “Your life is precious. It is dangerous out there.”

“I know,” she said softly, turning her gaze once more as he crawled to be above her. “And I’m sorry. I-I won’t leave again, I promise.” All her fight disappeared at her words, all her strength as she fell limply onto the bed. “I’m really tired. I was worried they’d come inside and attack us.”

The darkness under her eyes seemed to deepen.

“You haven’t slept.”

She shook her head.

She said I’d been asleep for two days.

He knew he’d been filled with sleeping venom until his body healed, and then he’d probably been stuck in a sleeping state past that in a haze. He’d only been stung by the arachnid once before, and he hadn’t woken instantaneously then either, like his mind had wanted to stay asleep even though the venom had vanished.

“Can I stay here? I’m too tired to move.”

Deep blue filled his vision as he backed up so that he could draw the furs over her to keep her warm, and her eyes drifted shut before he even finished. He hesitated before he leaned down and nuzzled the end of his snout against her temple.

“Sleep well.”

She was gone, his words unheard as her breathing deepened.

The sounds of Demons scuttling around his home drew his attention away from her, and he left his room to go fix everything to make sure she was safe. However, he looked over his shoulder at the doorway and felt a sense of satisfaction to have Reia asleep in his bed.

She looked so small and helpless in the sheer size of it as it dwarfed her. She barely even took up a quarter of it. Warmth spread at the sight, wishing he could stay there and take in the image for eternity.

Reluctantly pulling away, he went to the cooking area and reached into one of the cabinets to grab his ceramic jar of salt and the digging spike next to it.

The moment he stepped outside, most of the Demons scattered.

“It’s the Mavka, run!”

It always brought him joy to know how terrified they were of him. He’d killed many of them in his eons, and they knew he was one of their biggest predators.

One caught his attention as it ran past the porch.

He could smell the tiniest hint of Reia’s scent coming from its dog-shaped body. He placed the items he’d brought outside on the railing of the porch and immediately sprinted after it with a growl.

Even though it ran on four limbs, Orpheus swiftly caught up to it. Diving, he grabbed it by its leg and yanked it beneath him before it could leave his salt circle, trying to follow the others that went through the gap.

The stupid Demons headbutted the invisible wall over and over, not understanding how to leave even though there was a small stampede of about four who showed the way.

He paid little mind to them since he would eventually usher them out so he could seal them away. He turned his gaze down to the one writhing beneath him, yelping and barking. It had eaten many humans, but it couldn’t speak.

Orpheus grabbed one of its wrists and brought its claws to his snout. A snarl tore through his throat as he opened his

mouth to bare his fangs. The dried scent of Reia's blood stained it.

"You're the one that hurt her."

He would get to fulfill his desire to maim in vengeance after all.

It whined and wailed as he pulled on its wrist, slowly, oh so very, very slowly, tearing its arm from its shoulder. Delight soared through him as the sounds of skin-tearing, muscles-ripping, and bone-dislodging played in his ears like a wonderful song. Its horrified, pain-filled cries sent a shiver down his spine, ruffling all the inhuman parts of him that flared without cloth to keep it down.

Demon blood, being so foul, rarely stirred hunger in him.

He threw the severed limb to the side before he moved to the other hand, sniffing it to check that it had also harmed her. It had. He did the same, his tongue darting out to slip over the bony edges of his snout, as blood burst from its shoulder when it too was removed.

It gargled, trying to form a word. Perhaps stop or please.

This was a medium Demon, strong for a human to fight, but weak to Orpheus. Grabbing all its parts, its armless body thrashing in pain and fear – the scent wafting from it – he dragged it out of the salt circle.

It cried, knowing exactly what he was about to do next.

He threw it through the opening. Patiently, he waited, watching as it tried to crawl away with its back legs and torso.

The other Demons fell upon it, called by its blood, its fear. The ones that had been inside, unsure of how to get out, raced for it. It was eaten by multiple mouths, yelping as it was consumed before it was silenced when it became nothing more than a corpse to be fed upon.

He turned to collect his items to fix the salt circle.

Once he was done, he made four trinkets to protect the house, seeing that Reia had replaced the two over the porch which was the only thing that kept them at bay. The Demons

had been trying to scratch their way through the other side of the house, a small hole had been dug where he'd boarded up the window in her room.

She was lucky and smart. He'd woken in time to prevent them from getting inside and he thought by dawn – since it was night-time – they would have made their way inside.

Then Orpheus left his home to make his way to where she'd dropped the amulet. The dagger was gone, but the circlet tiara remained undisturbed. He bent over and picked it up, placing it in his pocket before returning home.

He checked the garden to find it was trampled, but mostly intact.

There was one last task he needed to complete, one that required he go to the stream to fetch more water. He was uncertain about leaving her, worried she'd run, but she'd promised him she wouldn't.

He thought she might be asleep the whole time regardless.

There was blood all the through the house, *his* blood streaking across the ground. He would spend the rest of his time cleaning so that Reia could wake to a clean and tidy home.

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It was only when Orpheus was done bathing in the tub, removing the remaining grime from his body, did he discover Reia had awoken. He'd been walking past the door to head toward the living area and poked his head inside to check on her, as he'd done often over the many hours she'd been asleep, to see her sitting upright in his bed.

If the sight of her as she sat with her knees up, arms folded and head buried against them hadn't already unsettled him, the sound of a sob would have.

He tentatively entered the room, unsure if she would want him near her right now. In the past, the humans always preferred it when he was as far away from them as possible when they cried.

"Why are you crying?" he asked softly, tilting his head to the side.

"I miss my family." She held her legs tighter. "I've missed them for so long."

He slowly crouched down on knee next to the bed, lowering himself so he wasn't a looming figure over her.

"What happened to them?"

He didn't know if she'd tell him. She'd refused to before.

"I killed them," she cried, her back heaving as her breaths shuddered. "They're dead because of me."

The desire to touch her with a comforting caress was too much for Orpheus to bear. He sheathed his claws and slipped his hand between her knees and head, lifting her face so she'd greet him.

"The Arachnid of Sorrows showed you your family, didn't she?"

Her lips trembled when they parted on another sob before her head nodded.

"I saw my mother, my father, my baby brother. I heard their voices. I haven't seen or heard them for so long. Not since I was a little girl." Her brows drew together and her forehead crinkled into so many creases. He'd never seen anguish this deep on a human before. "A-and they're all dead, all because of me. Why couldn't I have died too?"

"How did you kill them, Reia?"

She tried to turn her face away, but he cupped the side of it and kept it firmly faced toward him.

"I brought the Demons to our home." Heavy tears fell faster. The lines of her glassy eyes pink and raw, her nose and cheeks puffy and red. "I'm a harbinger of bad omens. That's why the villagers forced me to offer myself to you. They wanted to get rid of me because all I do is bring death!"

"What is a harbinger of bad omens?"

He'd never heard of such a term before.

"It's someone who brings Demons to those around them. Someone that the Demons don't kill while eating everyone else." Her hands raised to clutch his wrist as he continued to hold the side of her face. "I hid in the corner and let my family die. I-I did nothing to save them. It's all my fault. I think two or three Demons attacked my home, and I brought them there by my cursed luck. I-I'll probably get you killed too."

"There is no such thing, Reia," he answered with a subtle shake of his head while trying to not make it rattle. It was the truth, he knew it to be. "Were you afraid?"

“No? I don’t think so. I just remember sitting in the dark and covering my ears from the gross sounds.”

So, she’s always been with little fear.

“Demons like the taste of fear, and once they have killed, they are consumed by what they are eating. If you weren’t afraid, they were probably too distracted by the blood of your family to even know you were there.” She shook her head, telling him no, as she opened her mouth to rebuff him. “If you were quiet, made no noise and stayed out of sight, without your fear guiding them to you, they wouldn’t have been able to smell you if your scent was already strong in your home.”

“But if I hadn’t just sat there, I could have—”

“Could have done what? Died with them? The moment you moved to help you would have ended up just like your family. You lived simply because you had been lucky to remain undetected, but you did not bring the Demons upon your family. Your home was discovered, and without protection, it was attacked.”

“But my family has lived in that house for generations. We had a protection spell from the Priests to safeguard it.”

He snorted a humourless laugh.

“The magic of humans is weak. If a strong Demon stumbled upon your home, the ward would have done nothing but made it more difficult for it to get through.” He stroked his thumb down the crease where her cheek met her cute nose. “Do not let the lies of what the arachnid said fester inside you. It is not your fault. There is nothing you could have done.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Demons aren’t what humans think they are. There are many of those that don’t hunt humans anymore since they have done enough of that to become intelligent like me. They live in a town, and if there was the possibility of special humans, they would have spoken about it. I would have known about it.”

“There’s a town of Demons?” Her eyes grew wide in surprise, her tears slowing the more they spoke.

“Yes. It’s closer to the heart of the Veil. You humans don’t know of it because none of you would survive being here long enough to discover it and then leave to tell of it.” He lowered his hand to rest it on the bed next to her feet. “You are not special, Reia.”

To him, yes. Reia was very special to him. But in the terms of what she’d told him, she was not some chosen human with a dark gift. She was normal.

“Thank you,” she whispered, before startling him when she leaned over to wrap her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. “I feel a lot better now. I just... what they’d said to me felt so real, like the truth.”

He curled his arm around her torso, feeling warmth from her embrace. *She hugged me.* He almost wanted to crush and squeeze her in appreciation.

“The Arachnid of Sorrows reaches into your deepest sadness and uses the information to manipulate you. She liked the sour taste of it, the salt of tears.”

She’d even begun to wield her power over Orpheus.

“How did she even show me their faces?”

“She, like me, has eaten humans who have magic. It gave her this ability to reach in one’s memories and show you their faces and speak to you with knowledge that only you would know in order to trick you.”

“I-I saw the other humans you’ve brought here.” Tension shot through him like he’d been shoved into an ice-cold bath. She held him tighter when she felt it. “There were so many of them. I’m sorry you’ve lost so many people.”

“It’s fine,” he answered, brushing the side of his skull against her head. “The only one that matters right now is you.”

She gave a giggle that was filled with overwhelming sadness. “That’s very sweet.”

A grumble came from her stomach, a loud one, and she gasped before wrapping her arms around her mid-section. Pinkness, that had nothing to do from her crying, highlighted her cheek bones.

“Sorry, I’m really hungry. I haven’t eaten in two days.”

White cut through his vision. “What?!”

“All the food was outside. I couldn’t get it.”

Orpheus leapt to his feet, nearly sprinting outside to go to the garden. He couldn’t have his little human be hungry! He yanked a carrot from the ground, knowing enough that they could eat it raw, before picking the remaining strawberries from its bush.

Holding it in his hand, he thought he should have perhaps brought a bowl with him. He did place everything he’d obtained into one, so she didn’t know he had been touching her food with the bare flesh of his hand. Then he dipped a cup into the water and brought it all to her.

“Eat, drink,” he demanded, almost shoving them at her.

“Yes! Water.” She reached for it and gulped it down quickly. She was also swift in eating everything he’d brought her. “Thank you, that’s so much better.”

When she was done, he took the bowl and cup from her, putting them on the kitchen counter before returning.

“I need to wash you. Your scent is attracting the Demons and more will continue to come.”

“But I’m still so tired.” She groaned, wiping her cheek with disdain and grogginess. “Can’t you do it later? I want to sleep more.”

Orpheus shook his head. “The more that come, the more that will linger. If they accidentally brush dirt into the salt circle, it will break it and they could harm you if you are in the yard. You will not be able to sit comfortably in the garden anymore.”

And he could see how much joy that’d brought her since she did it every day.

“What if you lie down with me and hide my scent?”

His head twisted so sharply he thought any other creature may have broken their neck. “Pardon?”

“If I sleep under you, will it stop them from smelling me?”

“Well, yes. It would help,” he answered, before he licked at the inside of his mouth in uncertainty. “You… *want* me to sleep with you?”

Her nod was slight, almost shy.

“You’re really warm. If you don’t want to, that’s okay. I-I’ll, um, have the bath then.”

She sounded like that was the last thing she wanted.

“No,” he quickly said. “I do.”

I want to lie with her. The offer alone was enough to make his heart beat heavier, but it deepened even more when he walked to the other side of the bed. He was unsure about this.

“Do you want me above the furs?”

“No, it’s okay.” She reached over and pulled the fur covering back.

Yellow danced along the edges of his vision as he crawled under the furs, and it deepened when she was the one to wiggle further until she was pressed against him. She was facing him, her arms resting comfortably in front of her.

“You’re not doing a very good job of hiding me,” she said with a playful and mocking hint to her tone. “You don’t have to be so afraid. You can hold me if you want.”

Orpheus slowly turned, his heart quickening by the second. He’d wanted to rest with one of his humans more than anything, to hold them while they slept, and Reia was offering it, asking for it. All the things he told himself he shouldn’t be feeling after she run away soared despite himself.

Tenderness, fondness, joy, and *hope.*

Slipping his arm underneath her head to replace her pillow, Orpheus wrapped his other arm around her tightly, pushing her against him until he enveloped her in his embrace.

Her breaths were light and fluttery against his bare chest. He hadn't put on his shirt yet, though he'd been intending to right after his bath. Her elderberry and red rose scent embraced him, and the squishiness of her sent a thrill through him.

I can feel her heartbeat. It came from everywhere, racing through her veins, and it was *utterly* soothing.

Her hand brushed his chest. "Your wounds are gone. There isn't even a scar."

He placed the underneath of his long jaw against the top of her hair. "I heal within a day."

"Lucky bastard. My ankle still hurts."

A fluttering chuckle escaped him, the sound unusual and uncommon for him.

She was silent for a few moments, and he'd thought she'd fallen asleep again.

"Why do they call you Mavka?"

"It means forest creature. It is what they call me, like how your kind calls me Duskwalker because I can walk in both the darkness of night and the sun of the day."

She fell silent once more, and eventually her breathing evened out when she fell asleep.

Contentment radiated through him. He gently nuzzled the top of her head with the side of his jaw, adoring how she felt in his arms. He doubted he'd get much rest with how quickly his heart was beating, but he knew he'd enjoy every tortured second of it.

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Reia woke to the feeling of claw tips gently raking across her scalp and nearly moaned in bliss.

She knew she'd fallen back asleep with her hair grossly knotted. Orpheus must have been brushing his fingers through her hair for a long time that it was no longer tangled.

The points started from her hairline above her forehead to brush back until they reached the pointed dip of her skull before pulling through the long length of her hair. When he did it again, it started from the nape of her neck, the backs of his claws moving upwards until they reached that dip again and moved through the strands.

Both times it sent a shiver down her body that pearled her nipples into hard points.

As much as she wanted him to continue, if he did, he'd smell she was becoming aroused by the simple touch. She was beginning to understand just how good his nose was and how much it would give away her body's reaction to him.

Reia turned her head up, making him pause and lift his own.

"You're awake?" He removed his fingers from her hair. "Was I disturbing your sleep?"

She shook her head, realising she'd been hugging his torso while she'd been sleeping. She buried her face against his chest, sheepishly taking in a deep draw of his rich forestry smell. Her muscles were so lax in his warmth that she didn't want to move.

However, as much as Reia was shamelessly enjoying being in his embrace, she squirmed. She tried her best to ignore the sensation low in her stomach, wanted nothing more than to stay how they were. But the more she woke, the more pressing it became.

Reia groaned before pushing at his chest to get away.

"Is something the matter?" He let her go, his eyes turning a deep well of blue. "Did I upset you?"

"I've gotta pee!" she exclaimed, nearly rolling off the bed as she attempted to scramble to her feet.

She didn't know how long she'd been sleeping, both the first time and the second time, but she knew she hadn't peed for a *looong* time.

Oh crap, I'm about to wet myself! She bolted for the washroom, removing the lid of the chamber pot as the door swung closed. She moaned when it released after she sat over it, almost laughing at the fact it would have been totally embarrassing if she'd done it in the hallway.

I guess this was one way to get me out of bed.

A bed she very much hadn't wanted to leave, in the arms of a creature she very much wanted to stay snuggling with. It was a guilty pleasure, telling herself she was just too tired and groggy to stop holding him than the actual truth.

She washed her hands before rubbing sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand. She exited the room.

Seeming to understand why she'd evacuated so suddenly, she saw him standing in the hallway with his arms folded and blocking her path. He was wearing his shirt, and she couldn't help being... a little disappointed.

He may look strange, but surprisingly, she had liked his body. He was different, but it just added to his other-worldly

beauty that Reia was growing more and more accustomed to. She also knew just how firm it was, how much resistance his muscles gave as she dug her fingertips in.

“Reia,” he started, but she cut him off before he could continue.

She put her hand up.

“I’m not ready for that torture yet.” The idea of his hands rubbing over her body, leaving behind thrilling tingles, was already making her gut feel warm. “Can I eat first? I’m really hungry.”

He snorted a huff, his orbs tinging red slightly before they faded back to blue.

“Yes. If you are hungry then you must eat. But you cannot go outside until we have and you are wearing the amulet again.”

“Could you get me raspberries and boysenberries?”

The colour deepened. “I’m sorry, but the raspberry bush has been destroyed. I will have to use what I can to plant seeds.”

Reia bit into her bottom lip. The raspberries were her favourite fruit in the garden. She nodded, and he promptly left to get her whatever he could.

“I saw that you hung trinkets outside,” he said as she was scooping fruit into her mouth a few minutes later.

She was sitting at the table while he was standing on the other side, obviously impatiently waiting for her to finish.

“Yeah, I was worried the ones you put up would decay.” Then she pointed her spoon towards the short hallway. “I also hung them in the corners of your room.”

His head twisted, turning slightly on its side.

“You did? I didn’t notice that.”

“Well, I thought if the Demons got in the house because the ones I couldn’t get to were probably withered, that it might keep them out of there.”

His eyes flashed bright yellow. “That was very smart of you. I’ve never had to do that, but I’m sure it would have

worked.”

Reia blinked, her brows drawing together.

“I thought your eyes only turned yellow when you were curious or thoughtful.”

He brought one of his hands up to cover a glowing orb.

“No, the colours can mean various things. It also changes to yellow when I am happy or feeling pride, like just then.”

Her cheeks heated. *He was proud of me?*

Damnit. He makes it so hard for me to dislike him. She scooped the last bit of fruit into her mouth with a pout, both because of that fact, and because now she had no other excuses not to have a bath.

Reia felt much better after having a good few sleeps and being comforted in his embrace and their conversations. He’d eased her about her guilt and how she’d been called a harbinger of bad omens all her life.

Now... now she would have to face the feelings that had caused her to run in the first place. She wasn’t looking forward to that. She didn’t want to face them. She’d much prefer to bury them under a façade of ignorance.

She still didn’t know if he truly understood what he’d been doing to her when he licked between her thighs. That he’d made her come and what that meant.

How insane would it be if I felt desire for a creature that can’t even feel it? He obviously knew enough, but she wasn’t keen on the idea of being attracted to something that may not even have genitalia.

He didn’t seem to react the same way to her, and that made her feel inherently foolish.

Ugh, why do I even care so much? No one, besides him, was around to judge her. So what if she felt desire and he may not? It’s not like she was asking for these feelings.

Screw it, let’s just get this over with.

She was going to have to learn to get over it. Bath time was going to keep happening, and she just needed to teach her body not to react.

It seemed much harder than it sounded.

“Reia,” he warned after she’d placed her spoon in the bowl and sat there for a while.

“Alright!” She shoved away from the table to get to her feet. “Let’s go get rid of my human scent.”

She watched him as he prepared the area, lighting the candles that made the crystals twinkle with its reflections. He added new dried herbs to the crudely made metal bowl to create a sweet incense in the air. Then he used his claw to cut into his wrist, giving a few drops of his blood in sacrifice to conjure the bathwater that was already steaming once it filled the tub.

He knelt behind the head of the oval-shaped, long, wooden tub that was large enough to fit his gigantic frame. He was waiting for her to gain the courage to strip and hop into the water, staring at her with his blue glowing orbs that always made her think them prettier when he was in a darker environment.

It’s a bath. Just a bath. There was no reason to get excited.

She quickly pulled off her gown. Covering herself with her arms to shield her nudity, as if he wasn’t about to touch and see it all, she walked over and stepped inside the water. She crouched inside, submerging herself before she slipped her legs out so they were slightly bent.

Delectable heat surrounded her, trying to ease her worried and anxious filled muscles.

“If you are not bothered by my body, would it be alright if I rolled my sleeves up?” he asked, before his voice filled with an awkward kind of humour. “It is bothersome to change in order to dry them once we are done.”

Her heart nearly palpitated in her chest.

“That’s fine,” she answered with a shaky voice, dipping her head back to wet her hair in preparation.

She heard his clothing rustle, and then the familiar squelch of his fingertips dipping into the thick oil.

She could tell how hard her heart was thumping by her left breast floating in the water, jiggling lightly with each beat. Taking in a deep breath, Reia tried to calm herself.

As he always did, he started with her shoulder before moving down her arm with light massaging fingers. She'd never realised just how sensitive the muscles in her arms were, how they leapt to this kind of stimulation, until Orpheus had started working his fingers into them.

It pampered her each day to ensure she never had a stiff or pained muscle.

He pressed into the palm of her hand before moving his thumb between each of her fingers, splaying them and giving each crease in them attention. He moved to the other arm, giving it the same slow working of fingers. Then he washed her face, being the gentlest here with the least amount of oil as not to get any in her eyes, mouth, or nose.

She noticed he always lingered on her lips, almost pulling them apart with his thumb.

She had minimal reactions except for the building anticipation. This was the easy part. Everything else became increasingly harder to ignore.

The moment his hands touched the sensitive sides of her neck, caressing them, it always started the first of her shivers. Her hands clutched the rim of the tub when he started brushing through her hair, only ever unsheathing his claws for this part to scrape them over her scalp.

A moan threatened to break free, and she brought her lips into her mouth to bite them shut.

He lingered for a moment on a scar behind her ear, brushing his thumb over it in curiosity, but didn't ask her about it. He often did this, as well as with the one on her knee – the only two places where she had noticeably large scars.

Then his hands started moving down her chest, his eyes turning a deep purple. Shame shot through her when she felt her nipples hardening before he even *got* to her breasts.

They were waiting, wanting to be stroked. Hard and itching for the gentle pass over that would make her mind foggy with desire.

I can do this. She clenched her eyes shut, fearing she'd draw blood by how hard she was digging her teeth into her lips, when he cupped a breast to wash it. Reia jolted, her back arching slightly to press it more firmly against his palm so it would feel stronger.

A cry nearly broke through, her legs twitching when her core spasmed as his calloused hand abraded the aching point of her nipple. It gave a her a momentary taste of what they needed. Slippery, his hand worked over in a circle to make sure he covered the entire mound to clean it, before doing the same to other.

They always moved, the softness swirling even if he only applied the lightest pressure. It was dizzying, leaving room for her breasts to beg for a harder squeeze, a rougher touch. One that lingered, rather than left.

She covered her mouth with the hand furthest away from his head peeking over her shoulder so he could see what he was doing. She couldn't keep her mouth shut anymore. Her pants were too heavy that they needed the ease of coming from her slightly parted lips.

Why does he give me this reaction? What was it about Orpheus that sparked arousal in her so strongly? Already her clit and pussy were pounding, and tiny tears had collected on her lashes from the ache of them.

Even just the sound of his heavy breaths right next to her ears made her tingle.

Reia twitched and nearly jumped away from him when both his hands circled her waist and sides to slip down them after collecting more oil.

I can do this. I can do this. Her stomach dipped heavily when he ran over her navel, knowing exactly where his next destination was. Her body was screaming for the touch.

Her skin was flushed, not from the water, but from the heat that had started to build within her body. Desire was tightening like a coil in her belly, and she wanted it to unwind and release so badly.

He removed his hands to obtain more oil, and her eyes bowed in the anguish of this torture.

I can... His rough hand pressed against her folds to caress the lips surrounding her throbbing clit. It didn't stay, didn't play, and he drew down over her entrance, which felt even slipperier than the oil, to continue his task like this was nothing to him, meant nothing to him. *I can't do this!*

Both her hands shot forward to grasp his to still his movements. She grabbed an index and middle finger with one hand, and his ring and pinkie finger with the other, clutching them tightly.

His snout buried against her neck, sniffing her skin to see what was wrong. Reia felt like she'd nearly died as a small cry left her. Her body squirmed, and her head knocked him away when she lifted her shoulder to her ear to move him.

"What is wrong? You are acting strangely."

With panted breaths, she asked, "Why do your eyes change to purple?"

What did they signify? They often changed to that colour while he was bathing her, and they'd also been that colour when his tongue was delving between her thighs. They also happened occasionally when she smiled.

She needed to know, had to know.

They flashed to white, and she didn't know what that meant either!

"It doesn't matter."

She dipped her head forward with her brows knitting tightly. "Please, tell me."

"I'm sure you do not want all your emotions to be so easily read or understood," he answered darkly.

She squeezed her thighs together as a way to apply pressure to her clit like that would help ease her, while

refusing to allow him to pull his hand away when he tried. It was hovering above her pubic mound in the water.

A part of her felt so desperate she considered pressing it against her pussy and fucking herself with it.

I... I don't want to be alone in this. The idea of it terrified her.

"Do you desire me, Orpheus? Is that why they change to purple?" He flinched. She felt him tense by his fingers twitching. What he didn't know was the thought that he might was making Reia feel unbearably hotter. "Please, tell me. I won't be upset."

He slowly grated, as if the answer had been forced from him, *"Yes."*

Her lungs tightened before she released a strangled breath as her heart raced further, making her fingertips and toes tingle. *He desires me...* Just knowing that made her channel clenched in need.

"I'm aroused, Orpheus." The water reflected purple as they swiftly changed back. A wave of exhilaration washed through her in reaction, the colour now having a deeper meaning. "My body aches."

"So that is why you were twitching? I was concerned."

Claws raked against her scalp just above her ear as he captured the side of her head to pull it to the side. A moment later, he lifted himself to drag his tongue across the other side of her neck right underneath her jaw.

Her hands lost their grip when she let out a small cry, his tongue sending a strong trail of goosebumps over her from him licking at the sensitive bundle of nerves. He placed his now free hand against her stomach to palm her as it went down her abdomen and over her navel.

"Do you like my touch, Reia?" She felt his jaws opening as he pressed the tip of his snout against her throat, letting out a deep huff that felt even stronger than when it came from the hole of his nose. "Do you want it?"

“Yes,” she answered more in a plea when she felt the tips of his fingers running through the curls of her mound.

She spread her thighs by making her bent knees fall to the sides, allowing him in without hesitation. Her hands shot for the edge of the tub once more to steady herself, this time because his fingers slipped into the lips of her folds and then *stayed* there.

Oh fuck! Her head fell back, an unhidden moan coming from her when he placed his index and middle fingers against the hard nub of her clit and pressed with a circle.

“I have desired you from the first moment you smiled at me, my little doe.” He growled the pet name, just as his other hand moved from her hair to reach around her to cup a breast and *knead* it. To wonderfully knead it in the pressure her breasts had been begging for.

It eased the uncomfortable pounding she’d felt in it so she could focus on his touch instead.

“I have wanted to play with your body from the moment I brought you into the safety of my home. To *toy* with it.”

Oh god, so that’s what he meant when he said toy.

She could feel the warmth of his body through his arm and his hands, his very breath as it billowed over the side of her neck and caused her hair to stand end.

His earthy scent surrounded her and wanted to swallow her whole, and when she looked to him, the purple in his glowing orbs seemed to have the same intention, to consume the sight of her. He licked at his snout purposefully when she was staring at him.

His fingers continued to slip in circles, making her legs kick out whenever he pressed just right.

Reia looked down her body and her breath hitched. The sight of his dark grey hands with protruding white knuckle bones, one covering her breast and the other dipping between her spread thighs to cup her pussy, was the most erotic thing she’d even seen.

The contrast of his darker skin against her paler complexion made it easy to see where he was. His hand was large, so big that her breast barely fit in it, and yet she could see he was *strumming* her nipple, plucking at it. The other covered her pubic mound completely, shielding what he was doing from her. But she didn't need to see, she could *feel* his fingers playing with her clit.

I want them. Her eyes drooped as she stared at his hand between her thighs, watching herself buck into it with needy movements.

There was a place inside her that felt swollen, pounding with an aching rhythm that worsened with each swirl of her clit.

If he can feel desire, does that mean…?

Almost like she was afraid of the answer, Reia quietly asked, "Do you have a cock, Orpheus?"

He leaned forward, swiping his tongue over her ear, around it, inside it, and it sent a shiver through her. She heard the squelch of it against her ear hole.

"Yes, my little human, I have a cock." She moaned in loss, in anticipation, in thrumming demand, when his fingers moved away to travel lower. He dipped them at the slit of her entrance. "And it very much hungers to be inside here."

She arched, her hips tilting forward as the rest of his hand cupped around her entrance as his two fingers bent while he just stroked it. Just *teased* it. Prodding her slightly, but nothing more.

"Inside me," she begged.

She needed something inside her. Her core was weeping from it, hot and burning to be filled with something, anything. *I need his fingers inside me.*

"Your well is very wet. It's so slippery I can even feel it in the water."

She groaned at his words, squirming in both embarrassment and with trying to get them inside herself.

"Please don't call it that."

He made a thoughtful noise.

“What do you want me to call it then?”

Reia cringed because she wasn’t quite sure. What *did* she want him to call it?

“My pussy… or cunt.”

He gave a small chuckle of humour, the sound of it from him like a wicked sin to her writhing insides that quivered in reaction. A sound like that shouldn’t be so intoxicating from something like him.

“I like that word,” he nearly purred, drawing his tongue over her face to slip it over her lips. “Do have any idea what I want to do to your little cunt, Reia?”

His forefinger slipped away as he pressed his middle one inside. Her body latched onto it tightly at the snug fit of it. Already it tried to suck it in further. Her lips parted as her breaths hitched, her body trembling at the slow pressure being pressed inside, stretching her around his big finger.

“I want to taste it again.” His finger pushed all the way in until his last knuckle was just outside her entrance. “You tasted so delicious that not a moment has passed that I haven’t wanted to drink the aroma of it.” He drew back and then shoved it forward. “I want to stave off my thirst with your orgasms.”

Her hands released their grips so she could clutch both of his arms instead, digging her nails into his tough flesh. Holding onto him for leverage, Reia started moving her hips back and forth, needing him to go faster than this agonising slow pace.

His thumb plucked her nipple, constantly brushing over it to send more jolts through her and making her wetter.

“I have wanted to dip my fingers inside your pretty cunt every time you’ve been in this bath.”

He groaned, his body shuddering. His finger pumped, stroking her walls over and over and hit something that had her shivering and trembling each time.

Nghhh, that feels so good there. Touching, stroking, it even circled once to stir her.

“Do you understand how hard it’s been? To touch, but not play?”

She gasped sharply when he shoved his forefinger inside, stretching her around the girth of both of them.

“Ohhh!” she cried, trying to spread her legs further as if that would help to accommodate them.

This version of Orpheus with free reign, allowed to be real and truthful with his desires now that he knew he could touch her like this, was unravelling her. His deep, gruff voice sounded so much huskier than normal, raspy and almost torn.

His breaths huffed over her, and she mirrored the depth of them. Reia was panting, tears of need and beautiful torture making her want to cry. She was close, so very close, and she wanted him to send her screaming over the edge.

His fingers started to pump faster. They didn’t just go in and out, they moved like a wave, stroking the front of her channel with the tips to hit deeply a place inside that was making her vision split into two.

“I want to fuck you inside here,” he told her, and her walls clenched him, a pitiful sobbing cry coming from her in reaction to his words. She shouldn’t like hearing this from him, that he wanted to fuck her, and yet she was *enjoying* it. “My cock aches so bad for it, Reia.”

“I-it does?” Now that she knew he had one, she bit her lip while imaging what it could possibly look like. Would it be big, and long, and fill her so completely that it would rid the desperate need to be stretched like his fingers were doing? “Is it like a human’s?”

“Not. At. All,” he grated, each word punctuated by the sudden heavier thrust of his fingers.

Reia threw her head back, thankful his shoulder had been behind her to protect it, and screamed. Her nails bit into him as she started to come, little tears dripping from her corners

of her eyes to roll down her cheeks. *Oh god!* In heavy wet spasms, her pussy desperately tried to milk his fingers.

Stars sparkled in her darkened vision, her head pounding under the pressure as her body tightened.

It felt as though he sighed against her neck, like he'd been waiting for *her* to break apart under his slow and careful ministrations. Reia melted under the power of it, her legs kicking and squirming as mind-boggling pleasure ripped her apart.

How... Her scream softened into a long moan. *How can this feel so good with him?* How could she like his fingers inside her so much that it felt as though her body was singing with pleasure?

"But only when you want it, will I give it to you," he said when she started to go lax, dipping his tongue out against her cheek almost like a kiss. "Only when I've melted your heart and you accept me, will I try to claim this."

He pressed his fingers deep, leaving them there for the moment for her to come down around them gently.

"I didn't think you'd want anything like this," she stated around panted breaths, voice raspy and sore from crying out.

She wanted him to keep talking to her, his rich voice like a pet over her tingling senses.

Her mind felt dazed as her body sunk in the water. Everything seemed brighter, like her pupils were still dilated from euphoria.

He brought his hand away from her breast to brush it through her hair again, his claws holding her just as much as his palm.

"Why is it you think I wanted a bride, Reia?"

"For a companion… because you were lonely."

He made a thoughtful noise as he nuzzled the tip of his snout against her. "That is true, but I have many hungers, little human, and this is one of them."

Her core had been fluttering around his fingers contently, and she moaned in loss when he started pulling them away. A part of her ached for more, but another knew she was too sensitive to come again. Her body was new to pleasure, and she felt a slight twinge from him stretching her with just his digits.

Reia lay in the tub panting, her muscles giving after twitches. She felt like she was floating, the water giving her the buoyancy to aid this wonderful feeling.

“I’m sorry, but I must continue the spell.”

To have Orpheus’ hands massaging the rest of her body while she levitated in the afterglow of her bliss? *That sounds like absolute heaven.*

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After having one of the best sleeps since she'd arrived in the Veil, Reia had happily sat in the garden while eating her breakfast. Surrounded by the lush greenery of varying vegetables and plants, she took in a deep draw of breath, smelling the stronger herbs, like mint and dill, that wafted around her.

Surprisingly, Orpheus didn't stay to overlook the area to make sure she was safe.

The day was chilly with the wind that blew rather heavily than normal, and the clouds were moving fast, casting shadows over the area.

As much as she loved the garden, her heart panged her at how torn up it was. *Those stupid Demons sure did a fantastic job of ruining this.*

Many of them still lingered, walking along the salt circle as they uselessly tried to frighten her when she felt perfect safe inside it, especially with her amulet once more clipped through her hair.

Many of the plants had been kicked and pulled from the ground, and her delicious little raspberry bush was in tatters. The strawberry tree wasn't fairing much better, but she'd already picked most of it before then.

This isn’t actually a lot of food. Without meat, Reia was supplementing her diet with the use of the fruit and vegetables and was quickly consuming it.

Only when she was partially through her breakfast did Orpheus enter the garden. He was shielding something behind his back, but she knew he would show her what it was if he wanted to.

“I was wondering,” she said when he approached, walking between the shrubs on the dirt path through the middle of the garden. “Would you be willing to hunt for me?”

He paused mid-stride when he was almost to her. “You… want me to hunt for you?”

She could tell he was concerned, especially when his orbs deepened in blue.

“I’m going to run out of food if I only eat from this garden. If I have some meat, it means I can save some of it, and hopefully more will grow before I need it.”

He began to approach again, more hesitantly than before. When he was right in front of her, she squirmed in her seat. She had to crane her neck up to him as he towered over her. He looked much more massive than usual when she wasn’t standing.

Seeming to sense her discomfort, he crouched down onto one knee, but in a way that was almost caging.

“Is that truly why you want me to leave?”

Guilt squeezed her heart. “Yes.”

It was the truth, but his question deeply cut her after what she’d done; running through the Veil to flee his home and getting caught in a terrifying spiders web. Reia knew what would have happened to her if he hadn’t come in time, but she couldn’t help wondering what would have happened to Orpheus.

Would he have been sad? Could he have possibly missed her if she died? How many humans had done exactly what she’d done, and he hadn’t been able to save them in time?

He lifted a hand slowly to tentatively touch her cheek with his thumb and fingertips, making sure his claws didn't prick her skin. When he saw she accepted them, he then cupped the side of her face, and the roughness that greeted her in his touch and warmth of it was utterly soothing.

"I do not want you to leave me, Reia." Her eyes almost watered instantly at the sincerity and the deep well of loneliness and sadness she could hear in it. "You are beautiful." His thumb and claw tip lightly caressed her cheek near the crease of her nose. "And your personality is shiny. I have missed many humans that have left, but I like you more than any other that has come here. Even if you safely make it out of the Veil, you will be gone."

"I promised that I would stay and wouldn't try to leave again."

"But you still want to, don't you?"

Fuck. His eyes turned an even deeper blue and her gut tightened while her intestines felt as though they were tying into a bow.

"It's not you, Orpheus." She reached her hands up, and for the very first time, cupped the sides of his long jaw. "It's just... I don't know. It feels like I'm trapped here. I don't feel free."

"What can I do to not make you feel this way with me?"

With me... He was asking how to make Reia happy to stay by his side, and she didn't know the answer to that.

"I've always wanted to travel." She lowered her hands to place them in her lap so she could stare down at them. "I've been trapped in my whole life. I'd always hoped that one day I would be able to leave the village and see the world. I wanted to become a Demonslayer for that very reason."

"Even if I could do that with you, it would be very dangerous. Here you are safe. Here you will not catch a disease or be hurt if you stay within the protections."

"I know," she answered with a small voice. She knew she probably wouldn't have lived long as a Demonslayer,

foolishly trying to travel the dangerous world, but she thought she would have been satisfied just seeing a small part of it before she died. “Anyway, I don’t plan to run away again. So, if you could get me more food, it would make me happier. I miss meat. We had hunters that would hunt deer for us, and farmers who had animals.”

He lifted her head by placing two fingers under her chin so she would face him.

“If…” He hesitated, like he thought his words would be upsetting for her. She bit her lips together, knowing they would hold a heavy weight to them. “If you gave me your soul, Reia, I may be able to give you what you want.”

Her face paled while her eyes grew so wide she knew they were full and showing the whites of them completely. His hand flew away from her sharply, and he backed up to give her space.

She must have suddenly smelt of fear by how quickly and devastatingly it clutched at her stomach, like a horrible set of claws.

“I don’t know what will happen since it has never been done before, but I was told it would mean that you would always be safe… and with me.”

Her pulse quickened in her veins. Orpheus’ hand clenched into fists on his knee, and he turned his face away from her.

“I understand.” He stood to be above her. “I will not ask again.”

Then he held his hand out to her, bringing what was behind his back forward. It was the sword she’d used to fight the Demons.

“You said you wanted to be a Demonslayer, and I can see you are willing to fight. Would you like to train with a sword?”

All her apprehension and fear fled faster than it had entered her. She quickly got to her feet.

“What? Really?!”

“Knowing you would be able to protect yourself if I am unable to reach you would bring me comfort, as long as you do not use it to leave.”

“Yes!” she squealed, almost bouncing on her feet. The smile she gave was bright. “Yes, Orpheus, please. I would love to!”

His glowing orbs suddenly turned deep purple at her cheerful face. She flinched at how unexpected it was, her cheeks flushing with understanding.

He must have noticed, because his eyes turned into a reddish-pale pink, and he lifted his hand to cover one of them. Reia almost laughed when she realised that was his own way of blushing in embarrassment.

Pfft. Actually, she did laugh. *That was so damn adorable.*

Their earlier conversation was completely forgotten, and he led her out of the garden so they could have space to move. He gave her the sword, his eyes slow to change back to their normal blue.

“Okay. What do I do?” she asked when she held the leather winding grip with both hands, eyeing one of the sharp edges of the blade.

“I don’t know.”

“Pardon?” She twisted her head to the side to look at him with a confused expression.

“I have claws.” He gestured to them by flashing them in the dim sunlight. “I have never needed to wield a sword.”

“How am I supposed to learn, then?”

He gave a shrug of his shoulders. “I have been attacked many times by humans. Attack me until you understand how to wield it.”

“I could hurt you. Wouldn’t that make you angry?”

The last thing she needed was for him to go bat-shit crazy like he did when the Demonslayers hit him with an arrow.

A deep chuckle came from him as he folded his arms across his chest.

“You won’t be able to hurt me, my little human. You will not be quick enough, nor strong enough.” With his arms folded, he stepped in front of her so they were facing each other. “I will carve you a wooden sword if it looks as though you might, but until I do, you will train with this. I will make sure we are careful.”

“You’re awfully arrogant for someone who has never seen me fight.” She raised the pointed tip, making the silver metal glisten in the sun. “I was pretty effective at killing those Demons to protect your sorry butt while you were unconscious.”

“I’m sure you were, but let’s make you better.”

Having faith in him, Reia ran forward with all her might and cut downwards. He easily dodged it by stepping out of the way with his long stride, his arms remaining folded. She tried again, and he did the same thing. Reia slashed sideways and he merely stepped backwards at least a foot out of her range.

Eventually, they started moving in a circle with her chasing him while he easily stepped out of the way.

“Try a different attack, Reia.”

She stopped, huffing as she stood there.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you had your own sword so that I could attack it? It might help me learn.”

A sharp wind cut through them and billowed her white gown around her legs. The green one she had was ruined by Demon blood and she had yet to dye this one. She had collected the destroyed plants from the garden and was planning on boiling it this afternoon to dye a new dress.

Orpheus turned his head up to the sky and Reia followed his gaze. A sharp gust of wind curled around both their forms, filled with leaf litter and dust.

“That is a good idea, but something we will have to try tomorrow.” Dark grey clouds were rolling over them heavily, and she shivered when the air dropped a few degrees in temperature. “It is going to rain.”

“I love the rain,” she said, casting a smile at the clouds.

“You will not love it when it washes the protection circle away and Demons are freely roaming around the house.”

“Okay, yeah,” she sighed, slumping her shoulders as she turned her head down to look at him. “Fair point.”

“Come, we must prepare.” He gestured with a wave of his hand towards the front of the house they were standing close to. As they were walking towards it, he asked, “Would you like to help me make protection trinkets in case we need them?”

“Sure, but could you grab me some vegetables so that I can make a stew?”

When he agreed, she listed off what she wanted from what remained. She went inside while he fetched them for her.

Reia started up the cooking hearth so that she could begin to boil water, eyeing one of the cabinets above the kitchen area counters. She kept eyeing it as she was cutting up some of the herbs that were already available inside.

I doubt he’ll mind...

He was always telling her she could go wherever she wanted within the protective circle, could do or touch whatever she wanted. She nibbled her bottom lip, thinking heavily since what she wanted was something she knew was important, and she didn’t know if he’d consider it wasteful when it was used to protect her. Despite her happiness being something he considered a priority, her safety was the top tier of importance in his mind – to her annoyance.

Screw it, it’ll be fine.

Reia grabbed the chair she used to sit at the dining table with and slipped the weighty piece of furniture to the counter. She climbed onto it, making sure it was steady enough to support her weight, and then stood on it. She opened the doors.

Just as she was reaching inside, a large, warm hand wrapped around her back and side, startling her and making her nearly stumble. She swiftly turned to him.

“Be careful,” he said while supporting her back. “I don’t want you to fall and hurt yourself. If you want something, I am able to get it for you. What is it you need from here?”

His voice didn’t sound angry or bothered, was more laced with curiosity as he peered inside the cupboard with her.

“I wanted to use the salt you have for my food to make it taste better.” She grabbed the salt bowl with both hands as to make sure she didn’t drop it. “And I can do things for myself, you know. If I’m too short to reach something, I can use the chair.”

“I am sure that is true.” She yelped when his arm knocked into the back of her knees, knocking her over while the other came to support her back. She was cushioned into the cradle of his arms. “But I will be upset if you are harmed.”

He placed her down onto her feet, and Reia couldn’t help the small blush that rose into her cheeks.

Ever since her bath the previous night, she’d noticed that Orpheus was feeling more confident around her. He wasn’t as wary about being close to her, and although none of his actions had been sexual since then, there was a tenderness to them. Just like now, where he held her in his embrace so he could place her down on her feet, or when he’d held her face outside.

When she started to peel the potatoes, he came up beside her to crane his head over her shoulder.

“Would it be alright if you showed me how to do this?”

“You want to learn how to cook?” She continued to cut away the dirt-covered skins into a bucket inside the metal basin. “I would be happy to, but if I do, I’m sure you’ll try to do it for me, and then I will have nothing at all to do.”

It was as if Orpheus worried she’d break a nail doing even the simplest tasks. It was charming, but it meant there wasn’t a lot for her to do. He didn’t even like her cleaning.

“If it is something you enjoy, I will not take this task from you, but I would still like to know how. I once did, but that was a long time ago.”

“With the woman who lived here for a long time with you?” She bit her lips together when she realised she’d asked him a personal question she knew he wasn’t fond of answering.

“Yes.” He surprised her by replying swiftly. “She taught me how, but I have forgotten.”

Is he becoming comfortable enough to talk to me about her?

This mystery person played in Reia’s mind, and curiosity ate at her constantly. She had so many questions about a person who had stayed with him for long enough to ask him to build this house, a garden, furniture.

She must have lived here a long time.

Reia didn’t turn to him, trying to appear as casual as she could while he stood so close to her that she could feel the heat emitting from his body.

“Who was she?”

“Someone like you,” he answered, making her tense when she felt his claws brush through the ends of her hair. The disturbance of the strands tickled her scalp. “Someone who was not afraid of me.”

She only stepped away from him so she could take her now washed potatoes, carrots, cabbage, and onions to the side so she could begin to cut them. He followed so he could watch.

“What happened to her?”

He was silent then. The kind of silence that told her he was either uncomfortable telling her or uncomfortable by his own answer.

“She did not want to stay with me,” is all he said, and she got the impression he wouldn’t say anything more about it. “Why is it that you cut the carrots like that? The other humans made them thinner.”

She paused as she stared down at the thick slices of carrots she'd been cutting. "I guess it's because I like them to be firmer in the middle. I kind of enjoy the taste of raw carrot."

"Hmm. They have different tastes when cooked and not cooked? I thought it was only to change their firmness."

Reia laughed. "I'm guessing you've never eaten a vegetable in your life, but no, cooking them changes the way some vegetables taste. It's not only about how firm they are, but it also changes the textures. Cooking them in a pan without water also changes the taste, but I prefer to have soups and stews if I don't have meat."

He brought a hand up to cup the side of his snout in thought. "You will make different food to what you've been making now if you have meat?"

"Of course. I can make much more. If I had flour, I could make bread, and with honey I could bake sweets."

"I don't know what those ingredients are."

Once she was done cutting the vegetables, she began to finely chop the other herbs she'd asked for.

"Well, flour comes from wheat, and honey come from bees."

"What are bees?"

Reia turned, frowning up as she faced him.

"You don't know what a bee is? It's a flying insect that's fuzzy with yellow and black stripes."

His head tilted, making that slight rattling sound like his skull was filled with tiny bones.

"You are talking of those stinging bugs." His mouth opened and closed slightly as his tongue moved to lick at the top of his mouth. "They hurt my tongue. Why would you add them to food? They don't particularly taste good."

Reia covered her mouth as a laughed escaped her by accident. His eyes flared into a pale red to show he was angry at her laughing at him, or at least annoyed.

“We don’t eat them, Orpheus. They live in a beehive and collect pollen, so they turn it into honey inside their nests.”

His orbs changed to blue once more, and he turned his face towards the darkening outside just beyond the window.

“Would it please you if I brought you a hive so you could you get honey? There are some just outside the Veil. Demons don’t like them because they sting when attacked.”

A trickle of tenderness warmed her chest.

“Yes, it would.”

A loud crack of thunder boomed before the first signs of rain pattered in heavy drops against the window.

“Then I will bear being stung to get you honey.” Orpheus took a step back. “I will have to learn how to cook another time. I must go outside to keep the Demons away.”

“All you would have needed to do now was crush the tomatoes until they were like a paste, and add everything, including some salt, into the water until they were soft.”

A spark of yellow flashed through his eyes. “Thank you.”

He left to go outside, and Reia continued to cook her early dinner until it was ready. By the time it was, the rain outside was heavy and loud, showering the house with a downpour. When she peeked through the window, the clouds were so dark that it already appeared like night had arrived, even though that was still an hour away.

It was a violent storm with lots of quick strikes of hot yellow forking across the sky.

Reia placed her bowl of soup onto the table, but she didn’t sit down. Instead, she walked to the front door and opened it, peeking her head outside.

She waited until Orpheus could be seen, since he must have been walking around the house, and called out to him.

He headed straight for her.

“You should be inside.”

“Can I watch you and the rain?” She pointed to the trinkets hanging from each corner of the porch roof. “They

will protect me, and I’m wearing the amulet. I’ll even bring the sword with me.”

“But a Demon might run at the barrier while I’m on the other side of the house. There are many around after what happened the other day.”

“So?” she snorted. “It’s not like I’m afraid of them. It’s kind of funny when they hurt themselves trying to get through the salt circle. I’m sure watching them do the same thing to the house will be just as funny.”

“You are a strange human, Reia.” However, he paused for a long time, and she could tell he was thinking about it deeply. “As long as you keep the door open so you can flee inside, and make sure you call for me if one is able to get through, and that you will run first before you try to fight it, and—”

“Yes, okay, I got it.” Reia rolled her eyes with a shake of her head, feeling the teardrop jewel on her forehead swaying. “Make sure I don’t let myself come to harm.”

He nodded, and she turned back inside. Grabbing the dining chair, she dragged it outside and placed it directly next to the open door. She sat cross-legged while holding her bowl of soup, eyeing the sword that rested up against one of her legs for close keeping, before she turned her gaze upwards to the eerie forest.

A sense of tranquillity fell over her as she watched the torrential rainstorm. Deep puddles formed quickly, growing by the second, and the sound of the drops hitting the porch roof was calming.

This is something she used to do every time it rained in the village. Watching the rain while eating a warm and hearty meal had always been a small pleasure of hers.

“Come here, come here, come here!” A Demon frothed and snarled as it ran for her. Reia just brought a spoon of liquid to her mouth while waiting for the inevitable to happen. “Gotcha!”

It bashed straight into the invisible wall, its entire body crumbling from its speed. Its arms bent awkwardly as its head seemed to go inside its neck all the way to its shoulders.

“Ha ha!” She squealed, bringing her legs forward to kick them in joy. “Idiot.”

She watched it stumble at the bottom of the porch steps, disorientated and dazed. A moment later, Orpheus barrelled into it in his more monstrous form, sending it flying halfway across the yard.

He turned his reddened glowing orbs to her. They seemed more mystical and ethereal with the grey rain curtaining him. It was the first time she found them endearing to look at since their meaning wasn’t directed at her.

Heavy, wet drops glistened against his soaked form, dripping from his long fur that was puffed in agitation and pouring off his white skull. The drops seemed to glitter when they reflected the bright light of a lightning strike, covering him in dots of light momentarily. It was almost mystical, like he was covered in the mythical lights of fairies.

“See?” She smiled brightly as she twirled her spoon in the air. “Safe and sound with you around.”

He gave a snorting huff that was wetter with the rain pouring in through the hole of his nose, his eyes flashing deep purple before he took off to charge the Demon he’d knocked away. She could see they were red before he finished his first stride of his legs.

Whoa. That’s different. When his eyes changed to desire when he was normal, it usually sparked a hint of her own arousal. However, while he was like *that*, more animalistic and beastly, that had been oddly... titillating?

Reia hummed to herself a humour-filled tune.

Okay, so what if I’m a pervert? A smile brightened her features. *Who cares if I’m attracted to a monster?* She continued to quietly giggle to herself as she brought another

spoonful to her lips. *Who cares if I want to have se—Oh my god. What the hell is that?!*

Reia's eyes widened when she saw something large and *white* step from the tree line. It wasn't a Demon, couldn't *possibly* be a Demon, but it was still huge and strange.

It bounced as it walked, its brown legs bending high as its three-toed claws reached to the height of about its waist.

She placed her bowl on the ground and got to her feet to get closer while remaining on the porch.

It almost looked as though it was dancing as it crossed the yard, heading to the back of the house where she knew Orpheus was.

It wasn't coming for Reia, didn't seem to care that she was on the porch watching it as she walked to the railing.

It looks like an owl. Its wings spread a little as it did its little dance walk, bobbing side-to-side.

Just as it was about to walk past the house where she would no longer see it, it stopped sharply and turned its face to her, showing her dark black eyes that were like voids against its white feathers.

Reia scrambled back, nearly falling over, as it stopped and stared at her.

"Orpheus!" she yelled, backing away until she was at the doorway.

Within seconds, he was with her, standing on all fours at the bottom of the porch. He must have sprinted hard to get to her since he was huffing deeply. Instead of looking towards him, she pointed to the other end of the house.

"It is the Witch Owl," he told her in a gravelly, snarly voice.

It turned its head and started bouncing away, heading towards what Reia thought was the garden.

"She appears sometimes." Reia faced him, her eyes still wide and unsure. "I do not think she means you any harm. She has left gifts before."

"But *what* is she? She doesn't look like a Demon."

“She is part-human, part-other. She lives within the Veil, an entity unknown but who has been around since what I believe is the dawn of time.” He shook his body, water spraying from some of his longer furred areas. “I believe she is the one who gave me the amulet circlet, but I am not sure. She has only spoken to me once when human.”

“She can turn human?”

“Yes, but she is dangerous, Reia. Do not let her approach you. I am not sure what she will do.”

She nodded slowly, unable to conjure any words as her mouth opened and closed in shock. She’d never heard of a Witch Owl, didn’t know something like that existed, or that other beings lived within the Veil.

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Orpheus had spent most of the night outside circling the house to keep the Demons from it.

He'd bathed Reia like he needed to, but his hands had been more rushed than usual. He'd been excited to do this with her again after what the last one had led to, hoping she may want him to touch her so intimately again. It had brought him great enjoyment to watch her supple body twitch, contort, and tense due to his fingers. To have her shiver with his tongue on her neck. To hear the little cries, her pants. To feel inside her warm *cunt* and have it ripple around his digits while she came for him, because of him.

He liked that word, liked how abrupt it was, and liked that she'd given him permission to wield it.

Every ounce of his control had been tested. His cock had been hard, fully engorged, and near-bursting with deep throbs. He'd wanted to feel it again, to be that filled with desire that he was a thread away from losing control while being able to tell her what he wanted to do with her. To have her moan in reaction rather than be terrified that Orpheus desired her.

The pain he'd endured was worth it.

He wanted to know if it would happen again.

Despite his excitement for it, he couldn’t stay and linger. He was thankful she hadn’t asked him to as he knew he would have been torn in wanting to touch her and wanting to protect her.

Currently, outside was dangerous.

Rain was pouring in hard drops, and he knew one or two of his trinkets would fall apart under their force. If that happened, if they all fell, Demons would be able to break inside with ease.

He didn’t know if his rushed touch had elicited desire within her, but he told her he had to be quick in order to return to his duty of protecting her and the house.

It had happened before in the past. Orpheus had lost a human due to a storm and vowed it would never happen again.

Since he hadn’t had time, had forgotten due to his interest in her cooking, he asked if she would make him spare trinkets while he patrolled. The fact he could ask this of her because she’d been willing to learn and could aid him made him feel pride in her when he’d checked them and saw they were suitable.

It was only when the early hours of morning crept in that the clouds ceased their angry tears and started to clear away.

The ground was soaked and muddied. He worried how Reia would react when he told her she couldn’t leave the safety of the house by herself to sit in the garden until the dirt dried so he could carve a new circle and fill it with salt.

But, when she did awaken, Orpheus took her outside, under his intense and watchful gaze, so he could show her something quickly.

Her beaming smile sent a shudder through him. It wasn’t for him, so it didn’t send desire through him strong enough to change his vision, but it still brought him great contentment at seeing it.

“The garden is full!” she squealed, running forward despite his earlier warning to stay with him.

She started touching the leaves of the strawberry bush that had almost been picked clean, which was now full and much larger than it had originally been. The raspberry bush that she loved, but had been destroyed, was just as large and bore ripe and fresh berries.

Even all the vegetables she’d taken had resprouted, and he saw there was a small tree with yellow oval pieces on it. He’d never seen that tree before, and he didn’t know what fruit or vegetable it sprouted.

Everything smelt clean, ripe, and fresh. Water droplets clung to leaves and their meat, glistening in the light that was trying to shine through the remaining clouds.

“What happened?” she asked, walking over to the strange new tree and pulled a yellow oval piece from it. “The lemon tree wasn’t here before.”

He followed her like a shadow.

“The Witch Owl conjured it.”

He’d seen her dancing around the garden through the night, flapping her wings upwards into the air in a motion that was like she was pulling something while bouncing on her bird legs. He’d been curious as to what she was doing, but since she wasn’t causing any harm, he let her be.

It was also best that he didn’t attack her. He had a feeling he wouldn’t be able to harm her since she was overflowing with strange, dark magic. She smelt foul of it, a sourly, stomach-churning scent.

She’d also helped him. During the time he had his first human, the one he’d built this home for, the Witch Owl had come to him. She was the one who told him of the salt circle and the protection charm trinkets. She was the one that informed him if she willingly gave him her soul – since it could not be taken – then his human would live with him always, safe even in the Veil without his protection.

“This is wonderful. If you go hunting, this will all last so much longer. I was worried that I would have little to eat but there’s even more here than before.” She pointed to the new leaves that hid vegetables below the ground. “It’s as if she knew what I liked and made extra grow for me.”

Her want for him to leave and go hunting left Orpheus with a sense of foreboding. He wanted to trust her, he wanted to believe that she’d stay while he was gone, but he didn’t.

She already left me.

His heart withered whenever he remembered.

I want it to be her. Orpheus wanted Reia to be the one who wanted to stay with him. He adored her scent, had from the moment he’d met her, more than any other human before. She was so beautiful. He’d never seen a human as pale as her, with hair that was so blonde and shiny, like the sun. Her bright green eyes were like a thick forest, easy for one to get lost in, and he found he lost himself when he looked into them.

Her body was soft, curvy. She was the first to elicit such strong desire in him because of the way she reacted when he touched it. It seemed like her flesh was sensitive, and he desperately wanted to know how she’d react if he was to instead lick every inch of it rather brush his hands over her.

As much as he’d grown fond of the physical aspects of her, it was what she had inside that he was truly growing attached to.

She was strong. So strong in will that she even wanted to fight against the Demons that would harm her in the Veil rather than shake in fright. Something about it made him feel pride in her and trust that she would survive with him.

She was confident, willing to laugh with him when no other had before. Quick to learn, but happy to teach, she wanted to help him in any task, to do them with him, or watch him if she couldn’t.

She is perfect. A perfect little human that was quickly stealing his lonely, aching heart. Perfect in shape, in mind, with perfect little smiles with those green eyes that made his groin tighten every time she directed them at him.

He'd never felt this way about any other human. Reia was perfect, and he wanted her to be his.

So to lose her, whether that was because she left him safely or died, would be hollowing.

Even if she was lost and he found another human that wasn't afraid of him, they wouldn't be her. They may not want to pick up a sword, or want to make trinkets with him, or show him how to cook. They may not want to watch while he ran in the rain scaring away Demons or laugh when they ran into the wards.

They may not desire me. They may not like Orpheus' touch, may not allow him to lick their neck – especially right behind the ear. They may not give him the sweet little cry she made, one that was broken and deep of breath.

And they definitely wouldn't smell of elderberries and red roses.

"I will get you fish next time I am at the stream for your water." It was the best he could do for now.

He didn't want to leave her despite that he was constantly hungry and needed to hunt for himself as well.

"Fish would be good," she told him, giving him a small smile that was only bright enough to spread soft heat through him.

"Come, you should go inside." He gestured towards the front of the house. "I will pick what you want from the garden now that you know what is here."

She nodded, grabbing a *lemon* to take with her anyway, and started heading that direction.

Before they even left the garden, Orpheus shot in front of her and pulled her flush against his back. He gave a warning growl as he bared his fangs.

The creature came closer, large and tall, walking on its back legs and only using its hand to steady itself when it needed to. Its bony head twisted one way and then the other.

It paused when it heard him growl, and then took a wary step back.

“You do not usually warn me away,” he said to Orpheus before he rose to stand on his back legs fully.

He felt Reia peek around him while gripping the back of his shirt to stay with him. She gasped, tugging on it to pull herself more forward when he refused to let her.

“Another Duskwalker?”

“Oh,” he gasped in return. He craned his head to the side to see her better around him as he stepped that way. “You have a human?”

“Stay back!” he snarled, crimson red rising swiftly into his vision, a deadly warning.

The other Mavka cracked its neck when he twisted his head sideways. His bony skull was that of a fox and he had two large antlers forking with multiple branches on top of his head rather than the horns that Orpheus had.

He wore only tattered shorts and was a similar shape to Orpheus in body, except he had more long fur and more bones protruding from his skin, like around his hips and knees.

He was a less human-developed Mavka and most likely hadn’t eaten as many as Orpheus had. He had a similar diet considering his deer and wolf fur, but he must eat more birds since he had feathers poking out around his neck, shoulders, chest, and back.

Whatever they ate gave them their characteristics.

However, this Mavka visited him often compared to the others he’d briefly met. This was Orpheus’ territory, he was very possessive of it, but he allowed him to come here as long as he didn’t linger.

“Why do you have a human that you have not eaten?”

“She is *not* for eating.”

His green glowing eyes, the colour they usually were, flashed to a bright yellow.

“She is a companion? We can make companions with humans?”

Orpheus’ stance grew more rigid when he dared to step closer in curiosity. He’d never felt the urge or want to kill a fellow Mavka, but he felt it now since he was a threat to his Reia.

He sniffed the air while lowering himself to crouch onto a single hand.

“She does not smell of fear!” His yellow orbs flashed even brighter. “I want a human that will not make me eat them.”

“She is *mine,*” he bit with a growl.

He huffed in answer, rubbing the hole in his snout where his nose was.

“I do not want your one. She smells of sticks and thorns. I want a better smelling one.” No longer being so interested in his human, he looked up to Orpheus while remaining crouched some fair distance away still. “Does she allow you to touch her?”

Orpheus’ sight faded into a reddish-pink when embarrassment soared through him swiftly. Reia was right behind him, and he dreaded how she’d take his question.

He knew the Mavka meant touch as in hold, since he doubted he even knew what sex was, but he worried how Reia might take his meaning instead.

A shrilling laugh burst from behind him. The kind that was so uncontrolled that it was loud and high-pitched.

The fox-headed Mavka backed up with his orbs turning white. “What is that sound she made?”

It made sense that he’d never heard a human laugh before since he’d probably only ever heard their screams and cries.

“What do you want, Mavka?”

This one didn’t have a name like Orpheus did.

Orpheus wanted this to end, needed him to leave.

“I have come for more salt,” he answered, once more twisting his head in Reia’s direction. “The serpent Demon is still near my home and the rain washed away the circle you told me to place.”

Orpheus, while still holding Reia against him with one arm, raised the other to point the tip of a claw at him “You still have not grown the ingredients for the charm trinkets. I told you they would protect your home.”

This time, a pinkish-red entered his orbs instead of Orpheus’. “I tried, but they would not grow.”

“Fine, I will give you more salt and then you will leave.”

“Wait,” he demanded, reaching his hand forward when Orpheus brought Reia in front of him, so she was protected when he turned towards the house. “I wish to know more about this. If there are humans that are willing to be our companions, ones that do not make us hungry, then I would like one.”

His initial response was the want to tell him no and to be gone as soon as possible. However, he understood what the Mavka was feeling. The more humanity they possessed, the more they ached with loneliness, darkness swallowing them up with desolation and anguish.

He may be a less developed Mavka, but Orpheus was similar to his state when he started trying to ease his own loneliness – only to discover the pain of being abandoned. Of feeling more and more like a monster when he was rejected, when he ate those he wanted to befriend because the scent of their fear drove him insane.

With a sigh filled with understanding, he nodded.

“Remain there, I will bring what you need and explain everything.”

If this Mavka was interested in his relationship with Reia, wanting what he did, what he still didn’t truly have, then he had a long and hard road ahead of him.

I will aid him as best as I can. He would share of everything he knew, what he would have to do, to even be able to start this path.

For two days Reia was stuck inside.

She wasn't allowed to go past the porch. She wasn't allowed to sit in the sun in the garden.

She'd been worried about what it would be like to be inside in close proximity to him constantly, but that didn't happen. Orpheus had spent most of his time outside making sure the house was safe since the circle couldn't be placed down because of the wet ground.

He came inside often to check on her, finding her using the lemons to dye a dress yellow, or cooking, or even reading one of the two books he owned – not that she was much of a reader, and they were dull and boring. Since it was no longer windy and rainy, he was able to watch her while she cooked. It always seemed like he wanted to linger, wanted her to stay within his sight, but then would feel compelled to walk around the yard to make sure there were no Demons.

It appeared he'd frightened most of them away or had killed them after the incident with the spider one.

The main thing that brought her entertainment was being able to practise with her sword. He'd given it to her, said she could keep it, and he helped her every day as much as he could.

They trained on the porch since the area was just long enough and wide enough to allow her to. Thankfully the house had been built to fit his height with ease because it meant she could swing the sword as high as she wanted and didn’t hit the porch roof.

She was getting better, more confident, every time they did.

It allowed him to be outside and to listen out for movement, while allowing them to be together.

And… and Reia found she liked being near him. Perhaps that was because he was her biggest source of entertainment, maybe it was even because she liked him, but she often found herself thinking about the big Duskwalker whenever he was outside and she was inside by herself.

It was ridiculous. She should want to be as far from him as possible, to avoid him. She shouldn’t be upset being by herself, but that was how she felt. He was growing on her steadily.

Bath time was also becoming something she was growing fond of. He knew it, too.

Whenever it was growing to that time of the day, when the sun had finished setting over the horizon and she’d finished cooking and eating her dinner, he no longer needed to mention it. Her body seemed to be doing that for them.

Anticipation for it would begin to slick her core, and his eyes would change to that deep purple in reaction like he could *smell* it on her.

Then her arousal would grow when she watched him prepare, no longer disgusted by the ritual of the candles, incense, and him drawing his own blood. Not when she knew if she wanted it, if she asked him to – since she’d learned he wouldn’t if she didn’t actually ask – he would touch her intimately. He would stroke her clit, nipples, and insides until she came and went lax in the water to float in the heat in a euphoric haze.

He didn’t try to touch her unless she instigated it, didn’t speak to her or approach her about it even when he knew she was aroused. He also never demanded that she reciprocate.

He wasn’t cocky or trying to use her desire against her.

Everything was totally in Reia’s control, and it made her feel completely at ease. It made her feel… safe.

The other Duskwalker had also made her more curious about Orpheus. She never found out what they spoke about while she was inside where it was safe while they stood in the yard speaking, but she’d seen his feet!

Odd-shaped feet that were like hoofs near the toes but had a long foot behind it. She wondered if Orpheus’ were like that but, considering he was able to wear shoes, she didn’t think so.

So, what lay underneath his pants and shoes then? She knew what his torso looked like, knew he had dark-grey skin and possibly fur beneath it, but did he also have more bones on the outside of his body? More fins?

She wanted to learn about him.

The questions she had about the mystery woman were slow to be answered, and if she asked too many of them at the same time, he’d stop answering. She wanted to know what had happened to her, where she’d gone, and why.

She’d come to discover that she was the first human who he’d come across who he hadn’t eaten straight away. Like Reia, she hadn’t been afraid, and he found a companion in her. He built this home when she told him she didn’t like his cave, and they’d lived quite a few years together.

How long? Reia wasn’t told. His answers were sometimes vague. Just enough to quell the worst of her curiosities, but not enough to quench them completely.

She was also the one who gave Orpheus his name.

Then there were the other questions about his past, like where he came from. He didn’t know and didn’t remember

much about it. He knew he had been a mindless, hungry thing.

He didn't think he'd had a face until he ate for the first time. A wolf, and then he was given his skull. When he'd eaten an Impala antelope, he'd been given his horns. She'd been surprised to discover that he'd eaten animals for the beginning of his life, and the first time he ate a human was when he really started to think.

He also knew of four Duskwalkers, Mavkas as he called them, and they also didn't remember how they came to be, only knew they were *other* in the world.

Her fascination in him was growing, but she knew her many questions made him uncomfortable at times.

"Hey," she started, sitting at the dining table with him while they were making trinkets since the old ones were beginning to wither. He'd not long ago come inside and remained after carving a new salt circle because the ground was dry. "You mentioned there was a town of Demons, but I was wondering how that's possible?"

"They built it," he answered casually, tying a white ribbon around a bundle of dill.

"Yeah, obviously," she sighed. "I doubt humans would have built it for them, but why? Why is there a town of Demons to begin with?"

He turned his head away from what he was doing to look at her.

"It is unfortunate for your people, but only those that are small and weak mainly crave human flesh. New and young ones. Demons have been alive for centuries, and those that have eaten enough humans to gain humanity and thought, have begun to behave like them. There are thousands of you, and you grow in number quickly."

He placed his half-made charm down for a moment to think.

"Many of those that live in or around the town have been alive since the arrival of Demons in this world, and they

were able to feast until satisfied. Then they built, learned to speak with each other by learning the language of humans by watching them, and now they live together.” He shrugged before grabbing two jingle bells to attach them, once more continuing with his task. “There are not many of them. Perhaps a hundred or two, but they don’t leave the Veil unless they are hunters, and they hunt not just humans, but also animals to trade. They don’t need to eat as often, like I don’t.”

“Trade? What are they trading food for?”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing! This sounded… It sounded like he was speaking of an intelligent society of Demons!

“Jewellery, clothing, housing items. Many are fond of creating to spend their time. They also steal from humans, rob their houses and carriages, while also killing them for trade.” He gestured to the cloth bag of salt he had under the counter, something she’d only discovered when he’d given a large jar to the other Duskwalker. “It is where I obtain my salt, and where I have obtained my clothing.”

“Demons made your clothing? I thought you did, or like… you stole them from a human.”

Then again, he was massive. She doubted any human would have been the right size for him to take them.

“No. I traded for them.”

“I would love to see this place,” she grumbled, knowing that was impossible. “It would be interesting to see it.”

“Perhaps one day,” he surprised her by saying.

Reia frowned at her own trinket, her head rearing back suddenly. “What do you mean, one day? I thought you’d be against it.”

“I am. It is very dangerous. But as I mentioned, they are not like the Demons you have seen so far. They are more interested in the life they have, than taking it. They also do not attack each other like the Demons you’ve seen around my home. With your bath, I can make the human in your

scent undetectable, and I can also disguise you. And, as long as you remain inside my cloak, I can shield you."

"You've done this before," she gasped.

"I... have." His hands paused and his eyes darkened in colour. "A very long time ago, I was able to take a human there. She was able to pick things she wanted, and I would obtain them, like food I cannot grow, or items I do not have, or jewels and furniture I cannot make." He pointed his snout toward the cooking hearth. "I traded for that, as well as anything else made out of metal you see here as I do not have the means to smelt ore or fabricate with it."

He was speaking of the mystery woman again, and his eyes always appeared a saddened colour. *He said that she left him, didn't want to stay with him even though he'd done all these things for her.* Orpheus hadn't done near as much for Reia.

He didn't build this house for her or anything around it, in it, and yet she was... slowly melting for him. How had this person remained indifferent?

"Take me there?" she almost pleaded, her hands reaching across the table to beseech him. "I want to see it."

"I would like to. I have thought about it. But getting to it is dangerous, and if it comes to light that you are a human in disguise, I may not be able to protect you." Then he let out a sigh. "However, it is much safer to take you there than to walk with you along the border of the Veil where foolish Demons are willing to attack even me, and it is also easier than to take you to the surface where those that are the hungriest and most desperate to consume humans loiter. They are aware that I seek a human companion, what I am doing is known, so they may leave us be and allow me to walk with you freely as long as you stay with me. Like I mentioned, they are not like other Demons. They don't kill humans on sight unless they are starving."

"I trust that you'll protect me." Then she put her hands together like she was holding her sword and started

thrusting into the air. “Plus, I’ll just stab them if they try to take me.”

Orpheus chuckled brightly.

“You are strange, my little doe.”

Reia’s cheeks warmed at his pet name for her. He only ever said it occasionally, but it always made her stomach clench with a strange emotion.

It happened now, and her brows twitched when she felt a twinge of pain. It was fleeting, but her insides spasming had sent a wave though her.

“We still need to make you better with your sword. You’re not very good, Reia.”

“It’s hard, okay?!” she shouted with a laugh. “I’m not used to swinging a sword around. It’s tiring.”

“I cannot say the same. It feels as though I have picked up nothing more than a stick.”

“Well, I’m not big and strong like you are.” She reached forward over the table to grab one of the small animal bones, wincing when her abdomen pressed against the hard edge, before reclining back onto her feet on her chair. “You know, when I get good with a sword, I’ll make you… Orpheus?”

Reia paused when his eyes flashed to crimson red right after she finished tying the bone to the end of her trinket to complete it. His hands slapped against the table before his claws embedded into it.

“Why do I smell blood?” he growled, his shoulders and arms bunching with tension.

“I’m bleeding?”

Reia raised her forearms to check them, finding no wound. She raised on her knees to check her body and legs, then felt an uncomfortable squelch between her thighs.

“Oh fuck,” she gasped when she saw him shudder.

Okay, we have a problem. A big fucking problem.

“D-do you know what happens to women once a month?” she asked, seeing he was growing more agitated by the

second.

He was starting to shake his head, making that rattling sound, as if he was trying to rid himself of his thoughts or a fog.

White flashed in his eyes before they swiftly turned back to red.

“Yes.” He stood so suddenly his chair scraped across the ground noisily and almost tipped over. “I must leave. You are not safe with me.”

She watched as Orpheus practically bolted out of the house with the door slamming shut with a loud bang as he closed it behind him.

His final words to her were, “Stay away from me, and *do not* leave this house.”

Well, shit. Reia probably should have put thought into what they should do when she got her period. She knew he reacted to blood, knew it made him strange and hungry, but she’d forgotten about it completely.

Like merely realising she was going through her monthly cycle conjured it, Reia groaned, hugging her mid-section when she felt a terrible cramp assault her.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

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Reia grumbled when she sat on the human-sized living room chair that she'd dragged to the window to watch Orpheus sitting outside just within the salt barrier. He was cross-legged with his back to the house.

"Well, this is totally shit," she complained to the air.

She'd managed to get the fireplace going by herself, could feel it, and yet the house was unbearably cold. It was because she was alone and had been alone for three days.

Being locked inside while the ground dried had been difficult, but at least Orpheus had been able to come inside and spend time with her. The boredom was hard, but now that she was used to him being around constantly, having him completely and utterly gone was upsetting.

Don't tell me I've become attached to him? To his voice, his scent, to his mere presence. To those glowing orbs that conveyed so many emotions and she barely understood half of. To the way he took up all the space, leaving Reia very little room to feel alone.

He was there, right past the window, and yet it seemed like there were miles between them. *I haven't felt this lonely since I was a kid.*

For a few years after her family died, Reia had felt that way, but she'd grown to accept her life. She wore it like a

badge and persevered, refusing to wallow since she'd known the villagers weren't going to keep her company. She had learned to keep herself content, despite her misery.

Now that she'd experienced the overwhelming comfort of being looked after, cared for, and treated like she was something precious and to be treasured rather than a cursed disease, she felt a sense of loss at no longer having it.

I've become a pampered brat.

He didn't even come inside to wash her of her scent. What was the point? Her blood was drawing Demons closer regardless.

On the first day, she'd seen that Orpheus had carved a *second* salt circle just in case. He came inside after a little while, but he didn't say anything, and she could see his chest was unmoving like he was holding his breath.

He'd grabbed everything he needed. The jar, the spike, the trinkets that they'd made, and then he'd immediately left.

She knew he was also doing the same thing each morning, when she woke to find a bucket of food at the door as if he'd just pushed it inside and left.

Today was the worst day. It was early morning as she sat by the window, wishing she could go sit in the sun.

She was using wads of cloth to stem the bleeding within her underwear, had been doing so from the beginning, but she had to change it regularly. She threw all the bloodied cloth into the blazing fireplace, burning it to destroy the evidence and scent.

She was bleeding heavily, and her cramps were utterly terrible. She'd even started crying over it. She was hormonal and in pain and just started weeping pathetically. She was tired and felt bloated.

Despite the few Demons outside, Orpheus wasn't chasing them away. He was just sitting between the salt circles, doing nothing but shuddering. Today was the most intense.

It was like he could smell her from a distance, and his endurance was waning.

Fuck. How have any of the other woman survived past this? And then it hit her; she doubted any had.

She laughed. That was a rather cruel joke. Be born a woman who had to deal with the annoyance of bleeding once a month, and then *oops,* a Duskwalker eats you.

He'd once told her that he was no longer looking for a bride, but merely a companion. Was that why he'd allowed men to be offered? They wouldn't bleed. Perhaps he was hoping he could ease his loneliness with a friend he wouldn't be tempted to eat once a month if he couldn't have a bride.

Reia gasped and got to her feet when she saw him clawing at his back, shaking and shuddering wildly.

He's hurting himself!

Even from a distance, she could see he'd cut open his back by the wide flare of the four long gashes he'd created.

She ran to the door and opened it, shouting, "Orpheus, stop!"

"***Inside!***" he roared, turning his deep red eyes to her.

She flinched, realising she'd done something extremely stupid. As she was backing away, his body began to morph into his more monstrous form. He leapt away.

Orpheus left. He left the safety of the salt circle, left his duty of protecting the house that had a handful of Demons surrounding it. He left all day and didn't even return when night fell.

Feeling miserable, she circled up on her fur-covered armchair and brought her knees to her face. Okay, so maybe he was trying his hardest, but this situation was absolutely crummy.

It was even worse now that she couldn't see him. Instead, all she saw were Demons, hearing them wail over the distance.

I don’t want to be awake anymore, she thought after she cooked and ate her dinner. *Maybe I’ll feel better once I sleep.*

Reia lay in her bed, staring up at the ceiling while cupping the lower part of her stomach to soothe it, and eventually drifted to sleep.

She expected to wake in the morning, but she knew it was still the dead of night when she felt something wafting over her face.

The deep smell of smoky mahogany wood and pine needles pierced the fog of her sleep, and she wondered if she was dreaming it and the heavy feeling of heat wrapping around her as she slowly came to.

When her eyes finally fluttered open, her room was dark besides the slight glare of *red*.

Reia hadn’t mistaken that heat, or scent, or the sensation of breaths flittering across her face. Orpheus was above her on his hands and knees, the red glow telling her he wasn’t here to be sweet.

“You can’t help yourself, can you?” She almost laughed.

She knew the reality of the situation, that she was in danger, but the ache in her chest told her the truth of how she felt. *I missed him.* And even though he was bearing down around her with his jaw slightly parted and his fangs moving closer, she couldn’t help being relieved to have him close.

“***No***,” he answered, his voice distorted, strained, and growly.

“Are you going to eat me, Orpheus?”

She was staring up at him and didn’t look away or cower when his jaw slowly spread over her neck.

“***Yes***.”

He came closer, pressing his mouth down until she could feel the four long front fangs slipping around the back of her neck.

“Okay, then.”

There was nothing she could do to stop him either way. But strangely, she also felt like he wouldn't. Her faith in him was probably misplaced, foolish even, but right then she was just too relieved to care.

"***You are not afraid?***"

"No." Reia wrapped her arms around his neck to hug him and incidentally lifted herself further into his open maw. She felt his teeth digging in when his jaw started to squeeze the sides of her neck. "Plus, if you do, it'll probably stop the pain."

The pressure stopped getting tighter, like he'd halted.

"*You are in pain?*"

"A little. My stomach hurts."

It was always there, always throbbing and nagging at her.

"*Why does it hurt?*"

"I don't know, it just does. Most women feel this way during this time."

His fangs eased, but he didn't release her. She wondered if it was her hugging him or their conversation that was distracting him.

"*Is there any way I can help your suffering?*"

A small smile curled her lips, and she was unable to stop the swirl of emotions rising in her chest. Even when crazed, he still wanted to make her comfortable.

"I thought you were going to eat me." She brought one of her hands up to cup the back of his skull, stroking downwards from between his spiralling horns to the nape of his neck where long fur grew. "Why are you hesitating?"

"*Because I do not want to.*"

"Is this helping?" she asked as she continued to stroke him.

"*Yes.*" He started to pull his head away, and Reia gave him just enough space so he could shut his jaw before she slid her arms back around his shoulders. "*Being close to you is making it easier.*"

"Wouldn't that make it harder, Orpheus?"

“*Yes. I can smell your blood, but your touch is keeping the hunger at bay.*” Then he lowered himself, slipping his arms underneath her so that he could hold her. “My will to not harm you, Reia, is strong.”

His voice is going back to normal, she thought, her smile growing brighter.

“Do you want to lie with me?”

“I do not think that is wise. I don’t know how long I can keep my control in your presence right now.”

“Please?” She drew him in tighter. “You’re really warm and it’s making my pain go away.”

His hand was on her lower back, and the heat of it was easing the aching of her cramps to the point she could barely feel them. The momentary relief was worth the risk.

“I would like to stay with you,” he said, nuzzling the underside of her jaw. She turned her head up so he could do it freely. “But I will have to leave if I feel I may not be able to control myself. Thank you for calming me.”

I’m surprised it worked.

Reia tangled her hands in his fur and tugged him to his side on the bed next to her. She turned to him, facing his chest as his head rested above hers on the pillow they now shared.

“You said me touching you was helping. Do you want me to keep doing so?”

“Yes,” he answered, before a shudder rippled through him. “I would like that more than anything.”

“Okay, I will. On one condition, though. Could you please keep your hand on my back?”

Moving her hands between them, she started undoing the buttons of his shirt.

His hand moved to clutch both of hers.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to touch you. It’ll probably feel better if I’m doing it directly.”

It took him a moment, but he eventually released her, allowing her to open his shirt and untuck it from his black trousers. She nearly shivered in his delectable heat when she slipped her arms around his torso and felt his body against hers.

Her arms were bare, letting her feel how soft his fur was and the firm texture of his skin. She pressed her stomach against his, gaining heat from both sides as he placed his hand over her back once more.

Reia started stroking his back with tickling fingertips and palms, being light and gentle with this big beast in her embrace. He gave a deep huff, one that sounded of contentment.

His eyes were still glowing red, still rather bright with hunger, and she knew she was cuddling into a creature that was barely resisting the urge to consume her.

“Where did you go?”

Purple flashed for a second when she brushed her hands all the way down his protruding spine bones and fins until they found his trousers. She paused, not expecting the colour change, but it was already gone, and she moved her hands up once more.

Did I imagine it?

Since she wasn’t timid about delving into it, she dug her fingertips through his fur where it was the longest, right around his shoulders and upper back. It was silky in her grasp.

“To hunt, to ease my hunger.”

“Did it help?” She lightly scraped her long nails up his neck until they found the base of his skull.

He shuddered, his head twitching with a shake, as purple flashed once more before fading. *Nope, definitely not imagining it.*

“No. I am never satisfied.” He drew her closer and mashed their bodies together. “It never fades. Never goes away. I am always hungry, no matter what I do or how much I eat.”

Biting her bottom lip in uncertainty, she tilted her head up so she could see him clearly. Then she raked her nails down his back, not too hard but with a little more pressure than she'd done before.

His body arched, shuddering, as the purple this time held in his orbs until she was finished with her hard stroke.

"Be gentle, Reia," he warned with a pant.

She pressed her thighs together as a pulse ran through her core. *I'm turning him on.*

Giddiness sailed through her.

She was enjoying doing this. *I wonder if I can take away his hunger by making him aroused.* Perhaps this was a silly idea, teasing a Duskwalker, but she couldn't stop her hands wandering from his back to his sides, slowly making their way to the front of his body.

She even reached up and pressed her lips over one of his long-pointed fangs near the front of his snout. His hand shot up, cupping where she'd placed her lips.

"You kissed me." His voice was filled with awe. Simply because of the way he said it, Reia leaned forward and kissed his fur-covered neck. "You kissed me again."

He sounded just as dumbfounded the second time, and she almost laughed.

She buried her face in his chest, and her eyes fluttered in bliss at the deep draw she took of him through her nose. Her hands caressed his broad chest, feeling the rib bones that sat on the outside of his body and how fur poked through the space of each one. She explored his pectoral muscles, which were firm and hard.

He twitched when her hand ran over his dark nipple and a deep expire came from him.

His stomach was hard, rippling with muscles, like he didn't have a single ounce of fat to soften them.

She squirmed a little, rubbing her thighs together when she realised she was actually turning herself on by touching his body. Everything about him, the way he reacted, the feel

of his flesh, his fur, those strange bones, his damn mind-fogging smell, his gruff voice turning into deep huffs, was tingling her senses.

Her hips tilted, pressing them against his when her core sought friction. Her body was disappointed when she couldn't feel anything. Even though she'd never touched a man before, she knew they generally had squishy bits at their groin that would harden when aroused.

She didn't think she'd feel anything hard, but she had been expecting to feel *something.* Instead, there was nothing. From what she could feel through the space between her hips where her pubic mound was, there was smoothness at the junction of his legs.

He said he had a cock. And ever since he'd told her he had one, Reia had been curious about it. He said it wasn't human. She wanted to know what it looked like, felt like.

Where is it?

She slipped her hands down his abdomen until she felt one of her fingers dipping into his navel.

His hand shot forward to grasp one of hers to halt her movements.

"My mind is not sound right now," he told her, his voice gravely and breathy. "Be careful where you touch me."

Looking up, she found that his face was already turned down to her. His eyes were focused into a deep purple and remaining there.

His words were a warning. His eyes were proof of where his thoughts had gone to, and she felt not an ounce of worry.

I want to touch it. She wanted to discover it, to stroke it. She wanted to make it hard and see how he would react if she pleasured him.

He'd never pushed her to, never tried to make her, but right now, her body and mind were begging her to. Looking up at him was making her pulse rush in her veins, causing

the flare of desire to spark in her stomach to erase everything but that subtle ache.

“Orpheus... Where is your cock? I can’t feel it where a human would normally have one.”

She bumped her hips against his to show him what she meant.

“Hidden... inside.”

She tried not to open her eyes wide in shock at that, instead keeping her features cool. Okay, now she was *dying* to know about it.

“Could you show me where?”

His throat expanded like he’d gulped in nervousness, but he did begin to hesitantly drag her hand down his body. He slipped it into his trousers until her palm rested firmly against him.

At first, she felt nothing other than longish fur. It was only when he groaned when her fingers rubbed to search that she felt a seam that had a hard bulge behind it pressing against his skin.

“Why is it hidden?”

The more she touched it, the more she felt the seam trying to part open. It was moving, as if pressure behind it was trying to force its way through.

“For...” he grated, like he was finding it difficult to speak. “For protection, same as a Demon.”

Same as a Demon? She hoped he wasn’t trying to tell her that they could have sex too. Reia refused to linger on that thought.

She kept trailing her fingers and palm over the seam as she lowered his unbuttoned trousers so she could reach better. His hips quivered before his seam opened and something hard and wet touched her palm. Turning her head down, she wished she could see through the darkness as something began to come out.

It wasn’t pointy, but it wasn’t round, and it kind of felt strange, like there was a swirl of four edges.

“Reia...” she didn’t know if it was warning or a plea, but when she tried to wrap her hand around it, digging her fingers into the slit like seam, he accidentally thrust and it shot forward by a few inches.

Since her face was hidden from him, she allowed her eyes to widen as she gasped. It was fucking huge and was definitely spiralling in a downward twist. It felt similar to the spiral of a rose bud that had yet to bloom.

He started pulling his hips away when she thought she felt one of the spiral pieces *wriggle.* When she followed, she noticed his cock was trembling and was actually going back inside.

Is he trying to hold back? He was breathing deeply, almost like he was under a terrible strain. She hadn’t realised he was clutching her tightly until she tried to move so she could lift herself to see him.

There was no glow. She thought he must have his eyes ‘shut’ like he was concentrating.

“Orpheus,” she rasped, and he whimpered as his entire body tightened. *Fuck,* he was holding back! “Let go, Orpheus. I want to touch you here. I want to pleasure you.”

His body released all its tension, a deep huff falling from him so hard that his jaw opened to release it. If she hadn’t still been trying to hold his cock, she would have missed the confusing action that happened next.

The spiral released and something shot through the centre of it. His cock slipped over her palm, hot and wet with its own lubricant, rubbing up her arm until it touched near her elbow. The spiral had released to show that it had actually been holding his cock back as tentacle-like limbs writhed around her fingers where she’d been trying to hold him.

She tried to yank her hand back in shock, but one of them latched onto her hand and held her down, before a second wound over her wrist.

Different. Okay, very different!

If the fact his cock resting inside his body hadn’t been enough to tell it was different, the fact she could feel it had four tentacles around the base of it about five inches long each sure did!

Once her initial shock faded, glad that it, his cock, or whatever this part of him was, grabbed her so he didn’t notice she’d tried to scramble away, she pulled her arm just hard enough that she got them to release her.

She greeted the ends of them with curious fingers.

They circled the base of him, and two thick tentacles moved in swirls up her fingers. She brought her other hand closer to get the other two to do the same. It was a strange sensation to feel them writhing through her splayed fingers, and she noticed that the insides had little nodules while the outside was smooth.

With all her touching, one of her palms brushed over the hardened centre. She’d forgotten about this part; what she thought might actually be the main part of him.

Wrapping both hands around it earned her a groan, and he immediately pushed his hips into her hands, before suddenly halting. It was hot and throbbing so heavily throbs she could feel it.

Her fingers barely overlapped, the tips resting over the nails over her opposing hand, and her mouth dropped at the sheer girth of it. She should have known by how tall he was that he would be thick, but she wondered if this would even *fit* inside her.

However, now that the tentacles were no longer wrapping around it, it at least seemed more plausible than before.

Her core clenched with want, telling her she should try to find out with needy little thrumming. It wept for it, begged for it, telling her to throw all caution to the wind to mount it, but the idea of being that... intimate with Orpheus was daunting.

This was curiosity, this was exploring someone who was different to her. This was her trying to ease him and return

every one of his gentle touches that had never been demanded to be reciprocated.

This was Reia quelling the desire she'd felt in his body, and she adored the way she could feel it twitching even though she'd barely moved. That she could feel it was so hot that she'd bet it'd melt her from the inside out. That it was long, fat, and hard, and would leave Reia with no room to feel empty.

She pulled her hands backwards, feeling the slime covering his cock and the way it wasn't completely smooth. Over three sides of him, she could feel tiny little frills that were incredibly soft, but gave him texture running the entire length of him on three sides. Underneath was a deep crease, and when she dipped her thumbs into it, she thought she felt him harden even more.

Then her hands found the head. It was bulbous, but she felt more soft frills around the large rim that seemed to be the thickest part of him. The tip was more like the shape of an oval and there was a deep slit in it that followed the groove underneath him like it was attached to the same line, and a hole where she thought his release would come from.

When she squeezed her hands around it, rubbed it with her palms, he couldn't hold back a whimper, his legs kicking out as shaking tension shot down them. He pumped his hips once, making the head slip back and forth through the ring of her hands.

He halted once more, turning his snout down to press it against the side of her cheek.

"It is difficult for me not to move," he rasped, slipping his arm underneath her so he could cup her back while he moved the one resting above her to the back of her head. "But I will try."

He was panting heavily, and when she turned her head up to face him fully, she could see his jaws were parted to let them through.

“Is this okay?” she asked as she started to stroke her hands down on him.

A groan clogged in his throat, and he leaned forward to slip his tongue over her lips. “It is perfect.”

A giddy thrill shot through Reia as her confidence soared. She held him more firmly, squeezed harder as she moved down further. She even poked her tongue out to greet his by licking it back.

He froze at what she’d done, and she retracted her tongue in worry that she’d done something wrong.

Orpheus leaned up while cupping the back of her head better to tilt her face to him. He licked across her lips more firmly.

“Again?”

Her cheeks heated with a blush at seeing how much he’d liked it. She couldn’t say no with how sweetly he’d asked. Reia drew her tongue against his to greet it.

Such a deep groan came from him, and his hips shot back only to move forward once more, his cock slipping between her hands. She did the same, stroking him up and then back down on him quickly.

“Again?” he pleaded, his tongue running over her lips. Once more, she licked him back. “Again,” he demanded with a heavier voice, and she did. It was like kissing, since this was the only way she guessed they could. “Again.”

Those tentacles slipped around her arms before he yelped when Reia got to the base of him and ran her hands over two oval-shaped bulges. They were underneath his cock and attached to the base of him like they were partially embedded inside.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked, noticing his breathing turning more rapid.

He shook his head. “*Sensitive.*”

Then he started licking over her lips constantly.

When she tried to greet his tongue repeatedly, he started leaning over her more like he was getting swept up in the

dance of them.

Now that she'd felt all of him, she brought her hands up and down him in slow strokes, feeling him shudder and twitch, not just his cock but also his body. The heat he was emitting was warmer than normal, and she could feel him clutching her tighter.

She could tell he liked the head being played with since he always lightly thrust into her hands when she rubbed it.

I wonder if he wants more pressure. On a drawback, Reia squeezed her hands together hard, creating a tight ring, before she pushed it down onto him.

A groan, that sounded more like a growl, came from him. His tongue entered her mouth to twist around her own. She flinched in surprise, but didn't reject it.

Actually, her core quivered in reaction, her clit pounding so hard she couldn't stop undulating her hips uselessly. There was no relief for her, but she couldn't stop moving.

She squeezed harder this time, applying more pressure to the tip, and he expired a quick, but deep, huff.

"Reia," he warned, able to speak despite his tongue still being twirled around hers since she had opened her mouth to allow it.

It was a warm and wriggling sensation, his heady tasting saliva filling the crevice of her mouth.

He was warning her, and she didn't know what that meant. She thought it might be because it felt really good.

A smirk circled her lips. She sucked his tongue and gripped him even tighter, moving over the head and just a few inches below it with a few quick strokes.

A snarl was the only warning she got before his tongue twisted around hers, and she was forced to swallow it! His jaws opened around her face so he could press it in deep. His hands moved to the bed so he could steady himself slightly above her as he thrust his cock into her hold, faster and harder than she had been moving.

Her eyes watered at the depth of his tongue, that was deep in her throat, as he continued to thrust.

It was only when her hands drew away from him to clutch at his fur, silently pleading, did he swiftly retract his tongue from her. He also stilled his hips, huffing partially over her as they continued to lie on their sides.

“Be careful with me, Reia,” he said, his voice huskier than she’d ever heard it. “I am trying to hold back.” Then he licked her cheek as he said, “Sorry if I hurt you, I did not mean to. Your saliva just tasted so sweet.”

“I-it’s okay.”

He had warned her, and she’d foolishly tried to tease him.

“You do not have to continue if you do not want to.” His cock, which had been resting completely against her stomach and throbbed heavily along with his heart, started to pull away.

Her own heart nearly seized in her chest. Her hands darted down to hold him again and stop him from pulling away.

“No, it’s okay. You just surprised me.”

She wasn’t ready to relinquish her prize, and she didn’t even think she’d be more cautious. His tongue had aroused her, and his hips thrusting in deep strokes had her wrapping her legs around his in welcome.

Reia was turned on by what he’d done before. She’d gotten a taste of him primal, uncontrolled, and she’d fucking liked it.

Orpheus nearly purred when she gripped his cock again, a sigh of relief coming from between his fangs.

He buried his snout underneath her jaw, his breaths snorting as he huffed at her, sniffed her. Then his tongue came out to taste her when she stroked him all the way down the hard length of his cock.

Her hands were like beautiful torture, leaving an aching burn in their wake.

She is touching me. She was stroking him, discovering him, petting his shaft with little hands, and Orpheus was over-filled with tenderness. *Reia has her hands around my cock.* Because *she* wanted to. Because she desired to.

I want her. He could smell she was aroused by this, by what she was doing to him, and it took all his will power not to roll her over and plant himself inside her.

He could smell her blood, but his mind no longer truly hungered for it. Instead, his body was hungry in a different way. To consume her desire rather than her flesh. He was filled with a need to have her wrapped around him, to feel her heat surrounding him.

Orpheus wanted to *connect* to her. To have them become one.

He knew she wasn't ready for that, and he wanted nothing more than this for now. Her hands wrapped around cock, bringing him unfathomable pleasure, to give him release.

Her grip was tight, and he wanted it tighter, but he didn't ask her for it. He needed faster, harder, less long strokes, but she was accepting all of him into her hands, caressing every inch, every frill of skin, dipping her fingertips into the groove underneath him that was sensitive.

She even occasionally thumbed the slitted hole at the very top.

Reia was accepting him, his body that was different to hers. She didn't even seem to mind his tentacles that would wrap around her arms to cling.

The fact she wasn’t frightened about this part of his body, wasn’t jumping away with worry or anxiety, but was willingly massaging it was pure bliss in itself.

The more she stroked him, the more his cock lubricated itself, seeping through the pores of his flesh and onto her hands. The attention forced thick liquid to coat his cock, stopping it from drying out now that it was freed past his slit – which would have stung.

He tried to hold her gently, to not dig his claws into her supple and butter soft skin, but when she rubbed him just right, his body shuddered and clenched.

Instead of thrusting into her grip, his legs kicked in tension, taking his need to move instead.

But when he started getting closer to release, his mind fog-filled, his vision dazed, and his tentacles became more forceful. They started to latch on harder, making it difficult for her to move her hands over him.

Keeping his hand below her on her back like he’d promised, he moved the other to the base of his cock to give those writhing tentacles something to grip onto.

“Is something the matter?” she asked him softly.

He drew his tongue over her neck and then over her ear, swirling it over and inside it, in appreciation at her simple question, of what she was doing to him, at her just being Reia.

“Your hands feel good.” Good was not the correct word. What he felt was more than that, but he couldn’t think straight to formulate his words properly. “My... tentacles want to grip something...” They wanted to grip her. They were trying to reach around his fingers to get to her, but curled around his digits, regardless, to ease the ache in their need. “They will get more persistent. I’m holding them back.”

He watched her nibble the inside of her bottom lip, and his desire to lick over them was nearly too much to resist. Now

that he knew how plump they were, that she was willing to lick him back, he burned to play with them.

But he worried he'd press his tongue deeply inside like before. He didn't know if she'd liked it, but he had, and now he couldn't stop thinking about doing it again. Her tongue had been firm, her saliva sweet, her throat *tight.* He wanted them again.

"Will this help?"

She slipped her leg over him, baring her pussy against the base of him. He moved his hand away, and his tentacles shot forward to cling around her hip and pubic mound on the side that wasn't wrapped around his waist, while the other two curled around her leg to hold her to him.

He absentmindedly thrust against her. A sharp groan cut its way through his throat when he felt her folds through her underwear. They were caressing the oval bulges underneath the base of him where his seed was kept.

Yes, this was better, but Orpheus could no longer conjure words. She was *rocking* against him while stroking his cock, her hands moving faster and faster.

His head tilted up to face the headboard as he huffed and panted. His vision turned black, and he placed his free hand over her arse, kneading it to help him centre himself.

His ache was growing, his terrible need worsening.

He didn't know when he started to constantly thrust against her, but he couldn't still himself any longer. *Feels so good to have her touch me. Reia is stroking my cock.*

And he was lost for it.

Her scent was strong, this room now filled with it, and he was drowning in it. Her body was warm and surrounding him like a blanket of comfort as every one of her fondles pained him. Her sounds were quiet, but she gave pants and little moans as if she might be pleasuring her clit with the bottom of his shaft.

He didn't know, but everything in him hoped she was. Hoped they'd be able to share in pleasure rather than him

alone.

Reia, his mind groaned when a deep shudder wracked him. He felt the bulges at the base clench.

Reia, his little human. She was about to bring him to orgasm, and he held her a little tighter when she rubbed over the head. Down and up, massaging and gripping.

“Orpheus?” she asked when she must have noticed his chest was rising and falling in rapid breaths. That he was releasing little whines and groans that didn’t cease on each exhale.

His hips bucked harder. He wanted to apologise that he was moving so much, that his body was twitching and spasming, but a sharp whine buckled his lungs. His sac tightened with an unbearable clutch, making his spine tingle.

He let go of her; he knew he had to. His claws dug into his palms as his seed exploded from him and a loud, roar-like groan bellowed. She gasped, but he was too mindless to truly listen.

His body shivered as the first burst shot between their bodies, and he thrusted in time with each climb to help the other ropes that followed. He curled himself around her, trying to get her closer as his orgasm ripped from him like shockwave after shockwave.

His chest was growing wet, he was drenching her, but Orpheus didn’t care. Unfathomable pleasure clutched at his groin as his roar turned into a shuddering groan.

Even when all his energy was sapped and left him as nothing more than a huffing heap next to her, Orpheus couldn’t feel or think about anything other than his contentment and the cloud of rapture he floated on.

“Oh wow! So much came out.”

He would have said something if he wasn’t trying to piece his frazzled mind back together. *I have not come in eons.* A shudder rippled through him, making his fur and fins raise beneath his loose shirt.

“Did it feel that good, or do you usually come this much?”

Always with the questions. Reia was a torrent with them. If he could grin, he would have, and he opened his sight to find he was seeing yellow in the edges.

“Actually... Was this your first time? It can’t be your first time coming, can it?”

Orpheus chuckled.

“No, little human,” he said while his chuckle continued to rumble from him. “This was not my first time coming.”

He licked her jaw in appreciation, before nuzzling the side of her head.

She turned her head up to face him, and he noticed a pout in her lips. “Have... Have you ever had sex before?”

He tensed with her in his arms. *Does she want to?* Did Reia want him inside her as much as he desperately wanted to fill her? Was this her way of asking for it?

“Yes, I have.”

He didn’t understand why she frowned, why she almost appeared... *disappointed.*

She opened her mouth to say something, then shut it.

Then she asked, “With a human?” She was still holding his cock that was growing soft and would eventually start to retract with the help of his tentacles. “Does it even fit?”

She is thinking about it. He realised he wasn’t going to be inside her tonight, but Reia was thinking about it and that brought him hope. He was filled with it. *I will keep her alive. I will have her stay with me.*

He gave a thoughtful hum, nuzzling her neck where he knew it was the most sensitive – right over her jugular.

“It’ll fit.”

He... He could make it fit and give little pain if he did it correctly. But it wasn’t natural, and he’d need her permission.

He beamed when she squirmed. The tentacles finally released their tug on her and started wrapping around his cock when it began slipping inside. They twirled around until

it was covered and helped to drag it in, shielding it before the seam of his slit closed.

He continued to bump his snout against her as he thought.

I did not eat her. Even though she still smelt of blood and it still made him hunger, he didn't feel a single urge to feast upon her. Actually, she mainly smelt of his seed, and that was a satisfying thing to know. He was filled with overwhelming calm after his orgasm, the hunger of his desire satisfied and taking control of his mind.

He closed his vision, wanting to stay with her if she would allow him to keep holding her.

She wiggled in his embrace.

"I need a bath. The front of me is completely covered."

"Bath later," he puffed with annoyance. "Rest now."

"Huh?!" He could feel by her chin moving over his chest as she'd looked up to him, but he didn't move to greet her. "I never thought I'd hear you say that."

"Unless you want a bath to make me reciprocate, which I would gladly do, then I do not wish to leave unless you tell me to."

"I'm too tired for that, and I don't want you to leave. You're helping my pain."

"Then don't mind the mess. We will clean later."

"What about the Demons?"

I don't give a fuck about the Demons right now. He was too overjoyed and sated. He'd hear them if they tried to get into the house, but he'd carved a second salt circle because of the smell of her blood. It should be enough for now.

He'd scare them all off later, when she was no longer willingly in his embrace, deliciously covered in his seed, and marked with his scent by it.

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Reia nearly squealed as she was attempting to climb onto the dining chair she'd pushed towards the tall kitchen cabinets she couldn't reach when Orpheus picked her up and made her sit on the crook of his elbow.

"I told you not to do that, Reia," he scorned as he lifted her so she could reach, wrapping his forearm and hand around her torso to keep her steady. "If you want something, I would like to help. What is it you need?"

A warm fuzzy feeling fluttered in her belly as her legs dangled in the air beneath his arm, trusting him completely that he wouldn't let her fall.

"I saw when I was grabbing the salt last time that you kept the bells and some beads here. I wanted to take a few. Is that alright?"

She opened the cabinet doors and reached inside when he brought her closer to it.

"You may have whatever you like inside our home." He nuzzled the side of her jaw in a show of affection, something he was beginning to do more frequently.

Our home. He always called it that, and she wondered when she'd started to see it that way.

Something had changed since a few days ago. After she'd touched him, Reia was growing more comfortable here with

him. She still didn’t feel free, but she didn’t feel so caged against her will.

Perhaps it was because he was more affectionate. The physical distance between them was no longer because he forced it due to his worry about her apprehension of him. Now it was because it just was. Whether that was because she was eating her dinner while he was seated on the other side of the table fiddling with something, or he sat near her in garden. She noticed he was slowly getting closer and closer every day until she feared he’d sit right on top of her.

Since her monthly cycle had ended, she was permitted to be outside again. He was always close by, but he no longer felt the need to hover. Whether that was because he truly thought she was safe or because she carried her sword with her, Reia didn’t know.

It gave him the freedom to start carving a proper chair for her, and she’d watched him the day he’d cut down a tree so he could start building her things. He also did it to make sure they had enough firewood for the colder nights.

He trained with her every day with a sword, and his suggestion the previous day that he drag a Demon inside the circle to get her to kill it had been shocking to say the least! It had been a little one, and it had been more afraid of Orpheus than her, but she’d been able to kill it without incident.

It was only once. He’d said it was because he wanted to see if she could do it. He wanted to see how she faired and reacted to an actual Demon running for her. He’d been standing just off to the side within distance to save her from any harm had something gone astray.

He hadn’t needed to, and their faith in her capabilities grew.

“Why is it you wanted these items?” he asked as he placed her on her feet carefully and moved the chair back to its rightful place.

Heat rose in her cheeks, but she stemmed her embarrassment quickly.

“You’re making me a chair for outside, I thought I’d make you something.”

His body tensed, midway pushing the chair, before his head shot to the side to look at her so quickly it made that strange rattling sound.

“You wanted to make me a gift?”

“Sure, like a bracelet or something you could wear on your person.” When he just continued to stare at her frozen, she quickly added, “Or-or hang around the house. It’s up to you what you want to do with it.”

“A… gift. For me.” One of his hands rose to touch a claw to his chest. “Something for *me* to keep.”

Bright flamingo pink took over his floating orbs, reflecting off the white of his face to wash the colour in it. Reia stepped back with a gasp.

“What-what does that colour mean?”

She couldn’t even begin to guess, but it was definitely new!

Orpheus brought his other hand up to cover an eye.

“I don’t know. I have never seen it before.” He turned his head down like he was thinking, before his gaze fell back to her. “But I feel warm, and I have an overwhelming desire to hold you.”

Damn this strange creature and his sweet words. Reia giggled and rose her arms in the air.

“You can if you like.”

He was with her within the space of a heartbeat. Wrapping both his arms around her while tucking his shoulder under her chin, he lifted her. His long snout pressed over her shoulder and the side of her head as he rubbed it against her.

“It feels warmer,” he said. “It makes me not want to leave.”

Reia couldn’t help frowning as her lips puckered into a pout. “You’re going somewhere?”

He placed her back down, releasing her as he stepped away. “You said you wanted meat, so I will get you meat.”

“You’re going hunting for me?”

The pink faded to its usual blue as he nodded.

“Yes. I will be gone a day or two. Now that I know you can protect yourself, I feel comfortable leaving you here. I knew if I told you to stay inside while I’m gone that you wouldn’t.” He waved his hand to the window to gesture outside. “The protections in place should keep you safe, but if somehow one of the Demons got inside the salt circle, I know you’ll be able to protect yourself until you got inside.”

“So yesterday had been a test!”

He chuckled, the sound warm and light-hearted.

“Indeed, my brave little human.” Then he sighed, before dark blue seeped into the colour of his eyes. “But while I am gone, you must not do anything reckless, and... and please do not leave, Reia.”

He is trusting me. Orpheus was trusting that she wouldn’t try to run away.

That in itself meant more to her than he could possibly realise. Did Reia want to stay here forever? She didn’t know. If the possibility of leaving this cute cabin in the woods safely presented itself to her, she wasn’t sure if she’d hesitate to take it. But a small part of her was growing attached to this place, to him, to *this* life.

Yet, that came with complications. Maybe she could live the rest of her life here, grow old and die, but how would Orpheus feel about that? She knew he wanted her to stay with him for eternity, for her to give him her soul. But she didn’t know if she wanted the same, to be here that long with him. She could only imagine how he’d be if she was gone simply because she’d grown old or died of a sickness after many years.

Eternity was forever, and having to spend it with him stuck in this gloomy forest... some of it had appeal. A lot of it didn’t.

Reia was human. Shouldn’t she be around humans, live with humans, have a husband and child who were human? The path he was presenting to her wasn’t normal, and she feared to walk along it.

She reached up to cup his snout gently.

“Don’t worry, Orpheus. I’ll be here when you return,” she promised. “Safe and sound and ready for you to give me a bath.”

His eyes flashed to yellow. “You do like it when I give you bath.”

“Hey!” she exclaimed, her cheeks growing bright red with heat. “You’re not meant to say things like that!”

“But it is the truth.” He tilted his head at her. “Why can I not speak the truth?”

Because the truth was filled with the true intentions of her liking him washing her. She didn’t think a day had passed since she’d touched him that he hadn’t brought her release while washing her. It was like her body couldn’t help singing for him and was even doing it when she wasn’t in the water!

Oh, and he knew it too. Like now, when his purple tongue came out to lick at the nose hole of his bony snout as if he could smell it!

Damn bastard’s excellent sense of smell.

“Be safe, Reia,” he said, all playfulness falling to the side. “I am excited to see what you will make for me.”

“You’re leaving now?”

She peeked out the window to see that it was still early morning. She hadn’t even gone outside to have her breakfast yet.

“The sooner I leave, the sooner I can return. I’ve already checked the salt circle and hung up new trinkets. They are strongest when I first do this.” Then he turned to walk towards the door. “And no more standing on the chair, Reia.

I don’t want you to hurt yourself. You are fragile. If you need something, I will help you get it down when I return.”

She rolled her eyes at that. It was like he thought she was made of glass. Even if she fell off the chair, she doubted she’d do anything but give herself a bump or bruise.

She would have wished him well or told him to be safe, but she didn’t think anything could harm him. He healed fairly quickly, and she’d seen him fight enough to know nothing could really stand a chance against him.

She watched him leave by looking out the window.

Maybe I should ask him to make me a step, she thought when he was gone. Then she burst out laughing. *I don’t think it’ll matter. He’ll still be worried that I could fall from it.*

Laying the bells and coloured beads she’d taken from the cabinet onto the table, she leaned against it with her arms folded across it and examined them. She didn’t know what she was going to make, but she thought he’d like it regardless. That didn’t mean she wasn’t going to put her all into it.

She grinned at the items.

Big, stupid, bonehead. Don’t think I didn’t notice the first protection charm I made is currently hanging above your bed. She knew it was the one she’d made since the ribbon bow was lop-sided. His were always perfect.

Before she did anything though, she needed to eat. Her stomach was grumbling, and she knew the sun would be warming the yard for the few short hours it did.

Reia walked around outside with her sword not long after she’d eaten her breakfast in the garden – knowing he would have disapproved of her sitting in it without him – for at least an hour or two after Orpheus left.

She stood at the end of the yard, only a foot or two away from the salt circle and in the direction she’d seen him go when she’d watched him out the window.

So… that’s the way out of the Veil.

When she had tried to leave, she'd gone in a similar direction, but it must have been more diagonal. She figured his path would be more direct.

She clenched her fist around the handle of the sword she was holding.

I could do it. Seeing the slight imprints of his heavy weighted footsteps, she'd be able to follow the way he went.

I have the amulet. She could feel the weight of it, the subtle swaying of the loose sapphire teardrop tickling her forehead. Unless a strong Demon tried to touch her, the others would burn themselves like she'd seen the day after he'd given it to her.

And I'm getting better with my sword. The dagger had been a foolish and useless weapon, she knew that now, but the heavy metal in her hands was sharp, long, and could deal a debilitating blow.

She turned her head to look around the yard.

There are no Demons here currently. Orpheus had either killed them or scared them off after her period. She was sure they would come tonight when his spell eventually wore off, but none were here watching the house right now.

The path was clear.

He gave me a bath last night so my scent wouldn't be smelt from a distance. This was why she'd originally asked him to start doing it daily, using his hands directly rather than his gloves. It gave her more time, more freedom.

The path was paved, she had a sword she kind of knew how to use, and she was protected and hidden. This was Reia's chance. This was her moment.

There's plenty of food and water for me to take. She could pack a bag to last her days, and hide that she was human by taking one of his black cloaks and cutting it to fit her size.

He said he won't be back for a day or two. This was the first time he'd left for so long, and she *knew* he would try to

make it quick. She knew he wouldn’t want to be away from her in anxiety that she’d leave.

And she was thinking about it.

She *could* do it. Everything was ready, she was ready.

Demonslayers wander the world, even at night. Night above the surface of the Veil was dangerous, perhaps just as dangerous as her walk through it in the daytime.

The sun didn’t touch the ground between the trees. Only Orpheus’ home was open enough to allow it, and only at the back of the house where the garden was.

I’d be long gone before he returned to try to find me. She could hide her scent with snow and bark by rubbing it on her feet and skin.

So, why am I hesitating? Why wasn’t she rushing inside to collect what she could for her survival?

She turned her head down to look at the sword in her hand.

I’ve killed a few Demons but... but I’m not that good at it yet. If she came face-to-face with a strong one, she may not be able to fight it and survive. She couldn’t even take Orpheus by surprise or match his strength and speed. A strong Demon would be no different.

I-I only don’t want to go because I’m not excellent with my sword yet. Yes, that’s why Reia turned to walk into the centre of the yard, to swing her sword around so she could adjust to it and increase her agility with it. *I’ll um... I’ll go next time he leaves to hunt. I’ll be better then.*

She totally wasn’t staying because of the Duskwalker. She couldn’t be. *Orpheus would get over it.* He’d gotten over the other humans that had left him – one way or another.

Guilt froze around her heart.

No, he hadn’t, and she knew it.

She knew that within the depths of his humanity that bore his pain and sorrow, that he must have cared for each of his offerings. He had treated them preciously, like her, and them being gone saddened him.

I'm not *staying because of him.* She swung her sword sideways to the right. *It's not because I feel bad for him.* She swung the other way. *Or because I don't want him to be sad and miss me.* She twirled the sword in a circle at her side before striking downwards through the air.

He's a Duskwalker and I'm a human. We don't belong together. She couldn't be his friend, his companion. She didn't want to be his bride. *He's a monster. I can't have feelings for a monster.*

A creature who had claws, fangs, fur, and had tried to eat her *multiple* times.

A strange creature with pretty, glowing blue eyes that seemed so bright in the sunshine he could walk through. *He's a monster.* With a pure-white bony animal skull that had horns jutting out from it, with those same bones coming out of his firm and rigid body that had felt good to dig into when she'd touched him. *He's a monster.* With a warm body and lovely forestry smell, and a deep voice that made Reia's ears tingle.

Someone who was sweet, and gentle, and kind, with a caring touch that made her body sing with pleasure.

She threw her sword on the ground.

He's not *a monster.*

She crouched to sit on her ankles, wrapping her arms around her legs as she buried her head against her knees.

I like him. I don't want to make him sad.

She didn't care what he was, that he was different and a little scary. She wanted to be his friend. *But that means being stuck here.*

This is my freaking chance to leave, and I'm making excuses to stay. She hugged her legs tighter to squeeze her body in an attempt to release some of her tension. *He's out there hunting for* me. *He didn't have to leave, didn't have to trust me. He could have made me keep eating boring soups and fruit.*

I want to stay for him. I want to leave for me. Reia was torn. *I don't want to be his bride.* But she wanted to touch him, to watch him work around the house, to talk to him.

She still had so many questions, and she'd never be able to get the answers for them if she left. Like, who was this mystery woman, and what did the village of Demons look like?

She rose to grab her sword to keep practising with it.

I-I'll get better. When I'm strong enough, then I'll make my decision. Both would be painful. To choose to either leave or stay, and both would upset her. To be trapped here, but be with Orpheus, or to be free and worry for him, miss him.

I have plenty of time. She'd only been here for a month. A month. Longer than anyone else. She'd survived running away and being attacked by a creepy spider Demon. Him being unconscious, and fighting to protect him and herself while she dragged him inside. She'd survived a thunderstorm. She'd survived just being a woman who bled once a month.

But she knew she wasn't the first. *The mystery woman survived all this.* She had apparently spent years with him, so she knew she could be safe here.

She had plenty of time to get stronger, wiser. It had only been a month. She could survive another if she needed to.

What will I learn in that time?

She might be able to get all her answers.

Like where Duskwalkers came from, and why there was one that visited him. How many there were that he knew of? She could discover more about his past, about other strange things that could also be lurking in the Veil unknown to humans.

Is his cock purple like his tongue? She blushed at her own thoughts, despite *really* wanting to know the answer to that question. She knew what it felt like in her hands, that it was strange and oddly exotic. But what did it *feel* like inside her?

No! I don't want to have sex with Orpheus. She felt like she'd be signing away her soul to the devil. Touching was different. It was sharing pleasure, but not their bodies. If they did, she feared that she'd become his bride. *But I really want to have sex with him.* She was so curious about his cock, what it would feel like, what *any* cock would feel like inside her. To have something that thick, and hard, and long, thrusting inside her like his big fingers did.

I'm a damn pervert! She swung her sword downwards with a small scream. *A good for nothing pervert that wants to fuck a big, hot, sexy bonehead!*

Those purple glowing eyes now had a power over her with the way they reflected over his white skull in the dim light or darkness.

And that damn tongue. She hadn't had it against her again, but Reia remembered what it felt like, and she *wanted* it.

Screw this, she thought after a final swing. *If I'm not going to leave, then I should go make him his stupid gift.*

With a huff and wiping the sweat from her brow, she went inside so she could get a drink of water and begin to figure out what she wanted to make.

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Despite knowing it was probably stupid, Reia went outside the next day even though the effects of Orpheus' spell had worn off.

Orpheus was still gone. *I totally could have left.* He hadn't returned through the night like she thought he might. He hadn't shown up even the next morning.

She'd made a complicated dinner to fill her time, ate slowly, and experimented by dyeing a dress orange with the carrots she had. She was disappointed when it came out terribly because she hadn't used enough, then mashed up the boiled carrots into her food. She refused to waste anything.

But mostly, Reia had remade his gift multiple times because she'd hated everything until she finally came up with her final idea. She hoped he liked it. She wasn't sure if he would since they would need to be worn on his person and might be distracting for him.

Her sleep had been restless. She usually slept well when she knew Orpheus was around. That made zero sense to her, all things considered.

It meant she'd woken later in the day and almost missed her chance to be in the sun in the garden while having her breakfast. She often looked down at her pale skin, wishing

the sun that came through the mist was strong enough to make it darker.

It was warm, but barely.

Then, she trained with her sword like she did everyday, whether he was here or not. Since he wasn't here to watch her fail, she tried different and new moves, hoping she could catch him off-guard the next time he trained with her. Spooking the Duskwalker was becoming her goal.

She hadn't been going at it for long before a Demon came to watch her.

"Delicious, tasty, blood-filled human."

"Oh, go away," she sighed at it, rolling her eyes before continuing her training.

She heard it lick at its mouth, slurping disgustingly and loudly like it wanted to be heard.

"Your meat will be tender. Your bones will feel good to crunch after I suck out the marrow from it." Reia tried her best to ignore it, annoyed in her presence since it sounded feminine. "Come here, let me have a taste. Just an arm, or a leg, or your eyeballs!"

"You'd like to eat me, wouldn't you?" Reia turned to it and raised her brow as she met its red eyes dead on. "To rip my intestines out and gnaw on them?"

She was somewhat human formed, but she had horns similar to Orpheus and a long tail. She was black, they were all that void-like colour, but it appeared as though she had feathers coming out of her as she walked on all fours.

She gave a shivering ruffle, her feathers puffing from her.

"Yes, yes, yes!" she squealed, a bright grin showing her long and multiple sharp fangs, similar to that of a shark. "Intestines and stomach. I like the way it burns."

"Why a human? Wouldn't animals be just as good?"

The Demon swiped her purple tongue over her lips.

"They don't scream. Humans have the sweetest song when they die, begging and pleading." She cupped her hands together, having to lean her elbows against the dirt

as she interlocked them. “Oh, please don’t eat me! I want to live!” She made a wailing sound. “Don’t eat my children, take me instead.” She gave an even bigger grin. “I always eat their young first, makes them taste better after.”

Reia came forward to stand just in front of it, so that the only thing separating them was the salt circle. This one didn’t smell as foul as most did, and she wondered if perhaps the more humanity they had, the better they smelt.

“How many have you eaten?”

She tried to swipe at Reia with her claws, ready to gouge, but her hand buckled at the invisible barrier. She gave an angry hiss before narrowing her red eyes.

“It teases. The longer it takes for me to get you, the more painful I will make it, tasty human.”

Reia raised the tip of her sword at it.

“How many of my kind have you killed?”

“Seven ending screams I have swallowed!”

“I’m catching up to you,” Reia smirked, her lips curling with humour. “You will be my fourth Demon.”

“You do not eat Demons!”

Reia swung her sword sideways so swiftly the Demon didn’t have the time to react. Her head fell with a thud, rolling through the barrier and making Reia retreat in surprise. Her body fell a second later on the other side.

Ew, ew, ew!

Purple blood was on her feet, and the head rolled closer to her before looking up towards her when it stilled. The Demon’s mouth opened and closed uselessly, but it was no longer attached its body and eventually stopped. Reia booted it to the other side of the salt circle in disgust.

Well, that was fun! Reia had teased a Demon and then killed it! She’d protected the house herself. *I wonder how Orpheus would feel about this.* Her lips pursed together, knowing he’d probably be disapproving.

When blood continued to leak from its headless corpse, her eyes widened. *Oh fuck! Oh shit, oh shit, oh fuck!*

Blood had dripped from its neck into the circle carving and into the salt. What if it broke the protection there?

Reia quickly ran inside, pushed the chair in front of the kitchen counter, and reached to grab the salt and the spike he used to carve. She bolted outside.

Digging into the carving while nothing was around to attack her, she flung bloodied salt out of the ground, cringing when she saw more seeping into it. She looked up at the Demon's lifeless body lying there.

Oh crap, I have to move it. Reia wasted no time. She stepped outside the salt circle and began to yank it away so that its neck was facing the other way. *He'd be mad. So, so mad if I knew I wasn't inside the circle.*

She kept looking around, worried he'd come and catch her red-handed.

He didn't, and Reia was inside it once more carving into the ground until there was no more liquid and filled the crack with salt.

Here she was thinking she might be able to help remove the Demons that loitered around their home, and instead discovered that wasn't going to be possible. She hadn't thought about what would happen when the spray of blood fell.

She slumped back when she was done, sitting on her backside and staring at the ground. *He's going to notice that.* If how she'd carved it wasn't so obviously different to the rest of the line, the blood on both the inside and outside of the circle made what she'd done plainly obvious.

She knew other Demons would come and eat the body, but this was enough evidence for a scorning.

"That was naughty, little human," a deep voice said to her from within the shadows.

Her heart almost leapt to her throat when she saw the bony skull of animal with horns on its head begin to emerge.

I'm in so much trouble!

“It’s not what it looks like.” She looked at the Demon still lying there.

It’s exactly what it looks like.

“The salt circles are important for keeping bad things out.” He was so slow to come forward, stepping closer while crouching and using one hand to balance himself. “You shouldn’t disrupt them so carelessly.”

Her brows twitched to frown with surprise since he didn’t seem angry with her. She scuttled back on her arse when she realised it wasn’t him at all!

It was a different Duskwalker. The same one from the previous week. She should have known it wasn’t him since his glowing orbs were *green.* Orpheus’ had never changed to that colour in front of her before.

“What are you doing here? What do you want?” she continued to crab walk backwards as he drew closer and stepped out of the shadow of the tree line.

He came to the salt circle and allowed her to see him fully. He tilted his head sharply, making a rattling noise that was far more distinct than Orpheus’.

“I have been watching you since he left.”

“How did you know he was gone?”

She got to her feet and prepared herself to run if she needed to. She’d also grabbed her sword from the ground just in case she needed to fight.

“I was near the border when I saw him climbing the walls.”

“Stay the fuck back!” she yelled when one of his hands came forward, and he entered the circle!

She pointed the tip of the blade at him. He twisted his head one way and then the other, as he crept even closer, and brought his entire crouched body inside.

“Do not run. You will make me chase and hurt you.”

I like the hunt. Orpheus’ words echoed in her memory, reminding her of the danger she faced.

She inched backwards, trying to move slowly as not to incite any kind of hunger in him.

“H-how did you get inside?”

He turned his fox-head skull to the salt line, his large forking antlers casting a shadow on the ground.

“It keeps out those who intend harm.” Then he turned back and pointed at the house with a curved claw. “Those keep out those who do not live there.” She figured he was pointing to the protection trinkets. “I cannot make them. The ingredients do not grow.”

“You don’t intend to harm me?”

He came forward on his feet and one hand while shaking his head.

“No. Not harm.” He scratched at the back of his shoulder like he was itchy, ruffling the fur and feathers he had there. “Why is it you swing that pointy thing?”

She dared to look over her shoulder to see that the house felt miles away as she inched closer to it. *Still won’t make it in time if he’s as fast as Orpheus.*

“So I can kill anything that tries to eat me,” she answered, turning back to him to find he’d darted closer while she wasn’t looking. “Or hurt me.”

He was right in front of her now, just beyond her sword. He sniffed the bloodied tip of it.

“But I have told you I do not intend you harm. Why do you still point it at me?” He gave it a growl before he huffed in displeasure. “They hurt my flesh. I do not like when the humans have them.”

“Because I don’t trust you.”

He brought the hand he’d been scratching himself with to his snout to tap it in thought.

“But you trust Mavka. You live with us.”

“No,” she corrected. “I trust Orpheus.”

His head twisted until it was almost upside down.

“Who?”

“Orpheus.” Her brows drew together. “He’s the Duskwalker who lives here.”

Even though they were aching from holding the sword up for so long, she refused to drop her shaking arms.

“But he is Mavka. That is what we are called.”

“That’s his name.”

“Name?” He twisted his head once more to make it upside, but the other way. “What is a name?”

“He is Dusk… Mavka,” she told him. “But that is what he is called. If I called out Mavka, you both would turn to me. But if I only call out his name, Orpheus, only he would turn to me. It’s special. Like I am human, but my name is Reia, and only I would turn to the name when called.”

“Special?” His glowing orbs changed from green, what she thought they might always be, to bright yellow. “I want a name! I want to be called something special.” He stood, showing her his towering height while reaching out over her sword. “How does one get a name, little human?”

She quickly pointed it at his face, finding he was quite a few inches taller than Orpheus. She hadn’t thought anything could possibly be bigger than him.

“It’s something you’re given.”

“Can you give names?”

“You want me to give you a name?”

He nodded.

“Yes. Will you give me something special to be called?”

She gave a small laugh, finding that both creepy and endearing.

“Ah, no. I’m not very good with being creative. I don’t think I’m the right person to give you a name.”

His eyes faded to blue, much like how Orpheus’ orbs darkened when he was saddened.

“Look, I don’t know what you want from me, but I’d like you to leave. Please.”

His eyes went back to green. “But I want to speak with you. Mavka told me humans are difficult to keep, but you

are here. I wish to understand."

"If Orpheus comes, he'll be mad."

"I will hear and smell him."

He stepped closer, and Reia tried to match the length of his stride backwards.

"I said stay back!"

He stopped and crouched down once more to make himself smaller.

"I have upset you. I did not mean to upset you. Please speak with me, Reia human person."

She stopped retreating and blew a few strands of her hair that had fallen over her face. He'd asked nicely, and it did seem like he wasn't actually going to hurt her.

"Fine." Reia groaned. The sword fell and the tip thudded against the ground. Her arms were too tired to hold it up any longer anyway. "What do you want to know?"

"Why is it you stay with him?"

"Because he's my friend. I trust him, and I'm staying because I just am."

"He said that you came here with him willingly. Why are you not afraid of us?"

Reia shrugged her shoulders, eyeing him carefully in case he moved suddenly.

"I don't know. I've never been that afraid of much. I was scared at first, but not enough that he ate me. Like I said, I came to trust him."

"And you are not afraid of me? You smell different from before, better, but I cannot smell fear."

"He-he gives me a bath to get rid of my human smell. That's why I smell different, because he isn't here to give me one," she explained. "And I'm used to your kind now because of him. You aren't monsters."

His eyes sparked with yellow at that. "Monsters, no. Perhaps, maybe, but I do not want to be a monster. I want a human who will let me hold them."

Well, this is embarrassing. Her cheeks warmed slightly.

His eyes faded back to green, and he unfurled himself just enough to approach. He didn't step forward, but he leaned closer.

"He said it is difficult to find a human that will stay with us." He rested on his hand while sniffing up at her face. "You are not scared. Will you come with me?"

"Excuse me?!" Reia took a step back. "No, I'm Orpheus'."

"You are not his." He twisted his head in what she thought might be confusion. "You have not given him your soul. You are not his bride."

"That-that doesn't matter. I'm *his* friend."

"But you can come be mine instead." He came forward just enough to close the distance. "You could give me your soul instead of him."

He reached forward like he wanted to touch her face gently, and Reia smacked his hand away with her arm.

"Don't touch me."

"Why not?" he asked, reaching forward once more and Reia smacked him away again. Red came into his orbs, and he darted closer.

"I said no!" She went to grab the handle of her sword with both hands, but his eyes turned white and he swiftly retreated a step.

"He said 'no' is important. That I should not touch if they say no."

"G-good," she answered with a shaky voice. "He is right. If someone says no, you should listen. No matter what it is."

He placed his hand on his snout once more to tap the side of it. "Why will you not come with me?"

"Because I don't want to. I want to stay with Orpheus. Find your own human that wants you."

"Do you think I can? The others are always afraid, and it makes me *hungry.* How do I stop them from being afraid so they will stay with me?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "Just be gentle?"

"He told me I need to eat more humans first."

Her face paled, surprised that Orpheus would tell him to do that.

“Why?”

Why would he say to do something so terrible?

“Because he said I’m stupid.” She lifted her hand to her mouth to hide the snort of laughter that wanted to escape. “I do not have enough humanity to understand.”

Although what Orpheus had said was cruel, she couldn’t help finding he might actually be right. This Duskwalker was very different from the one she knew. Orpheus was far more intelligent. Even she could see this Duskwalker would struggle to understand a human enough to erase their fears.

“Where do you live?”

“A cave, like all Mavka – except this one.” He looked over the house. “It is strange. Why does he live in a human hut?”

Reia smiled. “Because it makes humans comfortable. If you really want my advice, be like him and build your own. If you bring a human to a cave, it’ll make them unhappy.”

He turned his head away, tapping at his snout once more with his foreclaw.

“He did say to be more like a human. I was going to ask him to help me get better clothes. The ones I take from the humans do not fit.”

“Like... help you by taking you to the Demon village?”

He tilted his head. “You know of it. Then can you take me?”

“Ah,” she laughed. He really *was* stupid. “No. You should definitely ask him instead.”

“Hmm. Then I will stay until he comes.”

“No. I think you should leave and come back later when he is here.”

“I will stay,” he said, sitting down on the very ground in front of her like a dog.

“You should leave.”

“I will stay!” he yelled, his eyes going red in a flash.

Something caught his attention. Something from *above.* He turned his head up before she even heard the *whooshing* sound.

Reia followed where his gaze had turned up to and nearly fell straight on her arse. *A Demon!* Not just any kind of Demon, but a flying one. One of the most dangerous kinds. Strong and ruthless.

And it was flying *over* the salt circle.

How is it above us?

She didn't get a chance to think about it any longer because it dove and headed straight for Reia with the cry of bird similar to that of an eagle.

Despite the Duskwalker in front of her, she ran. Okay, so instead of Orpheus returning to find out she'd left, he'd come back to discover she was fucking dead because she'd been outside like a damn idiot!

Was it the human in her scent it smelled? The blood of the Demon she'd killed? Perhaps a mixture of both?

She was running in the presence of a Duskwalker, but right now she was more worried about the flying Demon.

She felt the pressure of a clawed, three-toed foot starting to close around the upper portion of her arm right before she made it to the porch. *Shit!* It was right there, but Reia began to be lifted off the ground. It was grabbing her even though she was wearing the amulet, but the moment it tried to close its foot around her head, it screeched in pain from touching it directly.

Suddenly, they were both knocked to the side.

They separated, the flying Demon being tackled to the ground while Reia was let go and fell about a metre to the dirt. A cry fell from her from the impact, the wind knocked out of her completely while her own hand punched her in the face.

Pain radiated through her shoulder, and she groaned, cringing as she grabbed it. She didn't think she was bleeding but landing on it had hurt like hell.

Snarling and squawking above her head brought her attention forward to see the Duskwalker she'd been speaking to fighting the Demon.

It was brutal. Watching it was difficult with how fast they were moving as they swiped at each other.

The Demon used its arms to claw while the wings on its back allowed it to hover and jump. It looked more human than any other Demon she'd seen. Other than having wings and bird-like feet, the rest of it was human – even its face. It was even wearing pants! She'd never seen a Demon wear clothing before.

The Duskwalker jumped into the air to latch onto it and clawed down its stomach and back to hold on. He caught one of its wings in the process and broke it.

They both fell with a thump against the ground. The horrible snarling and yelps that came from both of them as they made a writhing heap as they fought, was horrifying. Purple blood flung off them as their claws glistened with the liquid.

It was hard to tell who was who, but she could make out the white of Duskwalker's skull and the red glow that emitted between them – the Demon's naturally red eyes and the Duskwalker's glowing orbs of rage.

She heard a distinct crack, and then the torrent of feathers that had been fluttering around them settled. A head was flung to the side, landing past the salt circle before rolling into the forest.

It was black instead of white, and relief settled through her. The Duskwalker had won.

Wheezing huffing came from him that ended with a curt whine.

"Are you okay?" Reia asked, shakily getting to her knees so she could stand.

She hissed out a breath when pain shot through her arm from her shoulder when she'd tried to use it to get up.

He growled. A deep, echoing growl that sounded bestial and ferocious.

Just as she got to her feet, he took a step towards her slowly, his maw open and dripping with saliva. Blood was pouring from multiple gashes over his body, and the crimson red in his orbs told her everything she needed to know.

He was angry. He was in pain. And Reia was about to be freaking dead.

She didn’t need to sprint far to get behind the safety of the charms that protected the house. The porch had only been a step away, and she’d climbed it before he could get to her.

With rabid snarls, he bashed headfirst into the barrier. Her heart nearly jumped out of chest at the crunching sound it made. Then he continued to claw and fight at it, bashing his head while also rubbing it over the shield protecting her.

With a gasp, she stepped back at how hard he was trying to make his way through to get to her. He didn’t relent, his movements quick and jarring. She could hear the deep thudding of his skull hitting the barrier, and it vibrated with a warping sound in response to his impacts.

She eyed her sword that lay on the ground near him and out of reach. *He has others.* Sprinting inside, she went to Orpheus’ room and grabbed one of the other swords that was a little heavier than she was used to.

She dragged it along the ground, her right arm too sore and tender to lift it properly. Then she faced the closed door while standing inside, ready to hold it up and spear him with it if he managed to get past the barrier and burst through the door.

Time passed slowly, a long length of it, as she waited while listening to his horrible sounds. He sounded like a frothing rabid bear and wolf mixed together. Sweat dripped down her temple and back, more from the aches and pains she felt while trying to stay there rather than in exhaustion.

Her heart pumped, but she refused to feel afraid because that would only make him try harder.

I just need to wait him out. Orpheus had been crazed and injured, and he'd managed to calm down.

He didn't want to hurt her, and she was sure he'd be upset when he realised he'd eaten her.

The animalistic noises just past the door eventually settled. Reia waited a long while before she eventually gained the courage to peek open the door. The sword was dragged beside her when she leaned against the doorframe and ducked her head outside.

A tall heap was lying at the foot of the stairs. Deep huffs of breaths came from him as he faced away, ending with more of those little whines that sounded awful, like he was in terrible pain.

"Are-are you okay?" she asked with just her head outside.

He turned his head to her, and she was thankful to find his eyes blue, like he was sad rather than an anger-filled red.

"It hurts."

Stepping outside slowly, she came forward so she could see him better. There was a small pool of blood forming beneath him, and his wounds looked severe. There were a few bite marks around his neck and shoulders while his torso was covered in deep gashes.

"I want to help," she told him, her eyes bowing in sympathy for him. "But I can't. I'm sorry."

She couldn't risk getting hurt because he lost it again. She couldn't wash his wounds or bandage them like she had for Orpheus.

Shit, I really trust that big bonehead.

"It's fine. I will heal soon enough." Then he curled into a ball as he hugged his midsection and shuddered slightly. "Can I stay? I will be attacked if I leave. I do not want more pain."

"Yes, you can stay there."

Reia kept the sword firmly in her hand as she slid her back against the wall outside and sat. She stayed there and watched him. Part of it was so that he didn't have to be alone while he went through this. Another was so that she could, maybe, protect him if another flying Demon came.

I've never seen one before. She eyed its headless corpse on the ground, black feathers like a sea around its body.

"Thank you for saving me," she said quietly when his movements settled, and his shaking eased.

Fortunately, the puddle had stopped growing a while ago as the day grew into the mid-afternoon.

"I did not mean to attack you, Reia human person." He finally pulled away from his curled-up position to sit while leaning on an arm and hip. "I am sorry."

"All good," she said with a laugh because it *definitely* hadn't been all good. "It's not the first time I've been attacked by a Duskwalker."

"He has attacked you?"

"Orpheus has tried to eat me multiple times."

"And yet, you are his friend? I do not understand."

Reia gave him a smile, knowing her eyes were glittering with the brightness of it.

"You did not mean to attack me, just as he didn't mean to attack me. He has protected me multiple times, and he is very sweet which makes it easy to forgive him."

He groaned as he continued to steady himself, touching his wounds on his chest to check them.

"But sweet is a taste. What does that mean?"

"It means he is very kind and gentle with me. He puts my needs first and wants to make me happy."

"Hmm."

He placed his hand on his snout and started tapping it in thought. She was beginning to wonder if he did it so much because he found it hard to think, like it was a difficult strain that required the help of an action.

He didn’t give her a reply before he started making his way to his feet, stumbling a step and using his hand to steady himself. He hissed in a breath that came out as snort through his nose.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she got up to stand as well.

He made his way to the flying Demon to drag it over the yard.

“Outside.” He pointed to the new Demons that had come and had already eaten the one she’d killed earlier. “They will help to get rid of its body. I will try to hide the smell of blood with dirt.”

He tossed its corpse through the barrier and the others descended upon it without hesitation, making wet, slurping sounds as they ate. She watched them with a cringe marring her features. *Ew, gross.*

The Duskwalker limped around while occasionally clawing into the ground to collect dirt and sprinkle it on the patches of blood.

“I have dirtied your hut.” He pointed to the bottom of the stairs where flecks of blood had managed to fling off his body and onto them when he’d been attacking the barrier. “They are inside your protections. I cannot hide them.”

Reia walked inside and grabbed a wet cloth to wipe it down and then threw it into the fireplace so it could be burned when she lit it at night.

“There, all gone.”

She clapped her hands together like she was brushing them of dirt as she came back outside to walk down the steps and out of barrier since she felt like it was safe to do so.

He’d calmed down, and she really wanted her sword back. She was also starving after the events of the day and could really use something to eat.

After her few hours of resting while watching him recover, her shoulder didn’t hurt so bad. It was still tender to touch

so she tried not to move it too much.

She placed her hands on her hips while awkwardly holding the sword.

“I don’t have any food for you, but I do have water. Are you thirsty?”

He surprised her when he reached forward to place his clawed fingertips on her cheek.

“What is it you are doing with your face?”

“Hey!” She stepped back and smacked his hand away. “We spoke about this.”

His hand flung away, and he cupped it to his chest while his eyes turned white.

“I forgot.”

Unbelievable. She shook her head.

“I have never seen a human do this or make that strange sound you make.”

Reia opened her mouth to explain what a laugh and smile were, but his head suddenly turned to the side to peer in a certain direction.

“He is here. I smell his scent on the wind.”

He looked around and then at his body that was still heavily wounded, but at least no longer bleeding. Her eyes widened as she turned her head the way he had.

“Then you should at least get out of the salt circle,” she said quietly.

Why does it feel like I’m about to be caught doing the wrong thing? Like she was *cheating* talking to this Duskwalker.

“I will be attacked if I leave now.”

He was wounded and covered in blood. No doubt the Demons would try to eat him. The key word here was *try.*

“Okay, okay, um.” This wasn’t good. She knew just because he sprinkled dirt everywhere that the scent of blood wasn’t gone, and she currently had a strange Duskwalker in the salt circle near her. “Just... I don’t know.

Go stand on the other side of the clearing, near the salt circle or something."

He started to do as she told him to, and Reia turned to where she thought Orpheus might come.

I hope I can keep him calm.

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Orpheus walked through the gloom, mist, and ever constant shadows of the Veil.

Underneath his cloak, he had a dead deer straddled across his shoulders with its four legs dangling on either side of his neck and down his chest. With it under his cloak, its scent was hidden by his.

Finding a deer to hunt had been the easy part. Finding one he'd managed to surprise and snap the neck of so he didn't spill a single drop of blood was difficult. He couldn't carry a bleeding carcass through the Veil without drawing attention and fighting with Demons for his meat.

There was also another problem. If the deer made him chase it, he'd consume it in a frenzy-induced high from the hunt.

Still, he'd managed to complete his task for Reia within a day, thankful a lone deer had managed to get separated and settled a short while after he slaughtered a handful of its herd in a craze.

He lifted his right hand, bright yellow filling his vision as his gaze fell upon what else he held.

I hope she will be pleased with what I found.

Getting it had been easy but keeping it had been painful. Licking his sore and swollen tongue against the roof of his

mouth, he shuddered.

A reward? Orpheus hoped she would give him something in return.

A smile. Another hug like the one he'd obtained before he left. A touch to his body like the one she'd given him when she had that strange bleeding only the human women he'd taken ever got. He didn't know it brought them pain, and he still didn't know what its function was.

He lowered his arm to hold what he held carefully, being sure not to crack it in the grip of his large hand.

The walk was relativity short since he wasn't ferrying a human and didn't need to stay at the pace of their short strides. Of course, border dwellers, like the ones near his home, tried to ask him what he had when they were close enough, knowing he must have something beneath his now odd-shaped cloak. Warding them away was easy enough. Just a simple snap of his maw in warning and they backed off.

If it had been bleeding, that would have been a different story.

As excited as he was to return to his little human, there was an unsettling feeling of dread. He was worried he might find her gone or dead.

As he got closer to his home, the scent of spilled Demon blood infiltrated his senses. He paid little mind to that. He couldn't smell any of Reia's blood on the wind, meaning she'd remained uninjured. The Demons often hurt each other, killed each other, ate each other; their foul-smelling blood wasn't any cause for alarm.

She is still here. Her scent was strong. She had stayed as she promised, and his tension eased.

However, there was another scent. The scent of Mavka blood. He didn't know what that could mean.

There were too many Demons around for him to run. He knew they would give chase and he might lose the meat he

was intending to give to Reia, but he did quicken his long strides.

He emerged from the forest into the beginning of the clearing.

His sight immediately found her standing in the middle of the yard already facing him. With her streaks of sunlight hair, snowy skin, and bright green eyes, she smiled for him.

It was the sweetest greeting he'd ever received upon returning home.

"Reia?" he asked, tilting his head as he crossed the salt circle. "What are you doing outside?"

He thought she might walk around the day before, but she should have known better than to wander outside the house without his spell in place.

"Um... Long story." Her eyes darted to his side before they widened. She stepped towards him. "Wait, is that what I think it is?"

"You said there is honey within these." He held up the beehive he had in his hand where a few bees were still persistent in fighting for their nest. "And that you wanted it."

But as much as he wanted to revel in his gift, something felt amiss.

Why can I smell Mavka and Demon blood within *the circle?* He began to lower everything to the ground, the deer sliding from his shoulders to thud against the grass. He was more careful with the fragile beehive.

That's when Orpheus looked over Reia's head to find the Mavka he knew standing on the other side of the yard *within* the salt circle.

He shot forward, wrapping his arms around her protectively and pulled her to his side.

She let out a small cry at his touch, one filled with terrible pain, and he jumped back from her as his eyes turned white. *Did I hurt her?* He didn't think he'd grabbed her hard.

She placed her hand around her bicep, wincing with a frown as she recoiled from him.

“Reia?” he asked as he stepped closer slowly. She didn’t retreat, and once more placed a smile on her face – one that was more forced. “What is wrong?”

“Ah, nothing.”

When he prodded her arm to see what the matter was, her body dipped, and she gave another little cry. Red filled his vision, and he grabbed her other shoulder to keep her still as he carefully curled his claws into the neckline of her dress. He tore it. A deep growl emitted from within his throat as his maw opened in disbelief.

He couldn’t have caused this injury, not with how old it was since the entire smooth flesh over her entire shoulder was dark purple and black. A bruise.

Reia was injured.

With a snarl, he turned to the Mavka on the other side of the yard.

“Wait, Orpheus. It’s not what you think,” she pleaded as she placed her hands on his chest.

He refused to listen. *Reia is hurt.*

He moved her to the side as he took a step towards him. He didn’t retreat, nor did he come closer, but his eyes did glow red to meet his threat.

“You hurt her?” Anger bubbled in his gut like a disgusting burning pit of lava. “You dared to harm my human?!”

Orpheus charged, his clothing beginning to seep within his body as it morphed. His legs grew more dog-shaped as more fur sprouted over his body to hide his grey flesh. He fell to his hands and ran on all fours by the time he was halfway to him.

The Mavka charged as well, sprinting forward with deer-shaped hindlegs and hooved feet. He closed the remaining distance to greet Orpheus head on, both their eyes red and their snarls echoing each other’s.

They barrelled into each other, but the other Mavka was weaker and too injured to fight Orpheus properly. He didn’t care why, only that it aided him. The Mavka never got the chance to gouge his claws into Orpheus’ flesh when they collided. Orpheus had already cut the Mavka's neck and chest.

The Mavka gave a wheezing cry, snapping his jaws forward to protect himself.

Orpheus dug his claws into the backs of his shoulders as he lifted him and then bashed him into the ground. He did it once, then twice, until he could find a moment to wrap his hand around his fox snout.

Orpheus began to lift him off the ground once he had a firm hold of it.

“***I will crack your skull!***” Orpheus lifted him higher and higher until his hoofed feet were slipping over the ground. His eyes changed to white, showing that he was surrendering – as well as his undeniable fear. “***I will shatter it!***”

He started tightening his hold on the near indestructible bone. When the Mavka’s hand shot forward to grab his own, Orpheus bit into his hand, making him yelp and squeal like a fox.

“Orpheus, stop!” Reia shouted before she wrapped her arms around him from behind.

“***Leave us!***”

He wasn’t sure what he’d do once he was done with his revenge for the crime done to her precious fragile body, but he wanted her away and safe.

“He didn’t hurt me, Orpheus.” She squeezed as tight as she could, refusing to release him. “If it wasn’t for him, I’d be dead.”

He continued to squeeze as the Mavka shook his head to free himself to no avail.

“Please stop.” She began to rub her hands up and down his chest, through the long fur of his more monstrous form,

in a soothing action. “He protected me.”

Releasing some of the pressure, he continued to hold his snout.

“*Why would you protect her?*” What did this Mavka hope to gain? “*Were you planning to steal Reia?* ***She is Mine!***”

Orpheus begun to tighten his grip again.

“I–” he started, before Reia interrupted by stepping between them!

Insane, she was insane to do something so foolish.

He turned his head down to growl, to get her to remove herself from them. She was between two Mavkas, and one of them was a threat to her and within clawing distance!

“He wanted to talk to me and ask for advice from a human on how to keep one.” She reached up and cupped his snout, curling her fingers around it to close it. “But a flying Demon tried to grab me, and he saved me before it could fly off with me. Without him, Orpheus, I would be gone.”

Her face in front of him, looking up at him so worried, bravely cupping his snout in a tender gesture, eased the worst of his anger. However, his anger quickly turned from the Mavka to her.

“This is why it is not safe to be outside!” he roared, his maw opening to echo his bellow and pushing her hands up to follow the top half as she tried to remain clinging to him. “*The salt circle only protects from those walking through it!*”

She’d almost been taken from me... She had stayed here for him but had almost been taken to be eaten, to die a horrible death. And he would have missed her, ached for her! *She is mine. I want her to be my bride.* He didn’t want another human. He wanted Reia, his little doe, his brave human who gave him hope in her strength and her desire.

I shouldn’t have left!

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out today.” She gestured one of her hands behind her to the Mavka. “I was training with my sword when he came to speak with me. While we were talking, a flying Demon grabbed me. I would have been out

here anyway and would have been swooped away if it wasn't for him. You should be thanking him, not hurting him."

Her bottom lip stuck out further into a small pout. He loosened his grip enough but continued to hold him.

"Is it true?" he asked him.

"Yes."

Orpheus eyed the injures he had that were older than the ones he'd delivered. Then his sight fell to the Demons who were persistently calling to Reia like a piece of meat, hissing and howling.

He remained to heal. He looked over him again. *This has only happened a few hours ago.*

"Orpheus..." Reia said to him with a deep tone of warning he'd never heard from her before. "If you hurt him further, I'll be really upset with you. I won't forgive you."

With a growl, he tossed him back swiftly at her words, watching as he crumpled to the ground at the sudden force.

The outside of his vision was still red. He yanked her closer, folding his arms around her to hold her as well as shield her if the Mavka tried to retaliate against Orpheus by harming Reia.

"Don't be upset with me," he pleaded. "There. I have let him go."

He didn't know what would happen if she was upset with him, but he knew it wouldn't be good. *She lets me touch her. She might stop.* That would pain him.

"Why are you outside with him while he is injured? You have seen me when I am hurt."

They tried to attack anything within the direct proximity.

"I was behind the house protections when that happened like I promised if I was in danger."

Red flared deeper and he clung to her tighter as he watched the Mavka weakly rise to his feet.

"So, he tried?!"

She reached up and cupped his snout again, like her small fragile body was enough to hold him at bay.

“I am safe now, aren’t I?”

He let out a huff of annoyance, then a curt growl when she turned into his arms to face the Mavka and attempted to step closer to him. Orpheus held her back.

“Are you okay?”

He released his own growl before he gave a snort.

“Fine. I will be fine.”

His white orbs flashed red in Orpheus’ direction before going back to their normal green.

Orpheus let his own go to their natural blue, although he was still wary of him. They both began to change from their monstrous forms back to their original ones.

“I’ll get some bandages to help you.” She started to push her way out of his arms. A small laugh escaped her as she mumbled, “I’m going to run out of dresses at this rate.”

“You do not need to bandage him,” Orpheus rebuffed, the idea of her touching another abhorrent to him.

“Of course, I do.” She shook her head, making her pretty hair sway around her shoulders. He had the urge to still the strands from moving so that the other Mavka couldn’t become tantalised by them like he often was. “Since you hurt him, we should care for his wounds.”

“But he will heal.”

Orpheus had never truly needed her help. He would have healed all his injuries within the span of a day regardless.

“It will help for him to heal faster if I stop the bleeding.”

She frowned up at him, and he got the feeling he was upsetting her again.

Orpheus would have to inform her that although the bleeding would stop, Mavka remained injured until a day had passed from their injury, then they healed everything suddenly within the span of a minute. It was both a blessing and a curse.

He stemmed his noise of irritation and released her, watching as she made her way inside. He turned to the Mavka sharply.

“You knew I was not here, and yet you remained to speak with her.”

“Why can I not speak with your human?” He tilted his head in confusion. “I do not intend any harm.”

“Because she is mine!”

She was his human to speak to, to look at, to touch. No one else was allowed to have her, especially not another of his kind.

He brought his hand up to tap a claw at his snout. “She is not your bride, but she is yours? I do not understand.”

For the first time since Reia’s arrival, Orpheus eyes changed to a bright green. A warning rumbled from within his chest, burning with possessiveness and malice.

Her light footsteps pattered over the ground, and he turned his head to watch her approach them.

“Could you sit?” she asked the Mavka while holding strips of torn cloth. “It’ll make it easier to reach you.”

He immediately did as he was told, behaving like a well-trained dog as he folded his legs. Orpheus’ claws dug into his palms when he sniffed her as she wrapped cloth over his – bare of clothing – neck, shoulders, and chest.

She is touching another. The green darkened into a different emotion; one he hadn’t experienced in an exceptionally long time but felt like acid in his throat.

He could tell by the hum that came from him as he stared at Orpheus that he was pleased with how close she was to him, touching him as she tended to his wounds. That he very much knew Orpheus was displeased.

“Our skull can be broken, Mavka,” he threatened with spite.

“She said she will be upset if you kill me.”

She turned her head back to look over her shoulder with a frown, not seeming to understand the game he was playing

with Orpheus.

“Are you threatening him?”

He was unashamed as he said, “*Yes.*”

“Well, don’t. I’m only doing this because you wouldn’t listen to me and hurt him.”

The yellow of joy brightened in the Mavka’s orbs at Orpheus’ grumble of defeat. *I want to crush it. It’ll feel good. Break it into millions of tiny little pieces.*

An idea lit in his mind once she was done.

“Reia,” he said to get her attention.

“Hm?” She turned to him, placing her hands on her hips while giving him a disgruntled expression.

“I am also wounded.”

“What? Where?” She quickly came forward to place her hands on him to check his body. Her instant concern gratified him. “I didn’t think he’d gotten you back.”

“I did not get them from him.” He showed her his bare hands since he hadn’t left with his gloves. He no longer needed to wear them since Reia accepted his body. “I got them getting your honey.”

“Aww, you were stung by the bees?” She brushed her thumbs over his hands, finding little spikes embedded into his skin. She tsked. “Come, let’s sit you down so that I can remove them.”

Yellow flashed in his own orbs when the Mavka looked disappointed in her care for him. She hadn’t just touched his wounds, but held his hands and patted his body.

They didn’t actually hurt that much.

“Stay,” he warned when he got up to follow them.

“No,” Reia rebutted, tapping him in the stomach. “He can come. He shouldn’t have to sit near the circle anymore.”

He sighed. *I have to be good. Cannot crush his skull, cannot tell her no.* Reia’s happiness mattered more than his own.

Gesturing for Orpheus to sit on the porch steps, she stood between his knees and cupped one of his hands so she

could use her nails to remove the bee stingers that remained in his skin. His fur and shirt had saved the rest of him from being stung.

The Mavka was crouched into a seated position only a few feet away as he watched them with interest. His head turned one way and then the other while examining them together.

“Anymore?” she asked when she was done with the other hand.

Orpheus began to open his jaw. “I tried to eat a few to get rid of them.”

“You got your tongue stung?”

He nodded.

“Okay, fine. Only because you worked so hard to get it for me.”

Slipping his tongue forward, he opened his mouth a little wider and Reia started checking it for stingers.

“What are you doing?” The Mavka asked with a tone of disbelief. “You are reaching into where he eats!”

“She trusts I will not hurt her. Don’t you, Reia?”

She nodded as she removed the stingers one-by-one.

“Yes, I guess that’s true. Why else would I reach into a Duskwalker’s mouth?”

“This is not believable,” the Mavka said, raising hand to tap at his snout.

Orpheus withdrew his tongue from the air when she thought she was done, and he checked by sliding it against the roof his mouth.

“Thank you,” he said, before he leaned forward and licked her right underneath her jaw.

She giggled in response, and the Mavka’s eyes turned a dark green, signalling his jealousy. Orpheus chuckled, feeling much, much better at seeing it. *She is my human, Mavka. She trusts me.* And he was proving it.

Even when she pushed his snout away to stop him after he did it again, his elevated mood didn’t dissipate.

“Reia, I have brought you a deer. You will have to cut it yourself since I cannot be near its blood, but I have brought you meat.”

“If I take what I need from it, will you both be able to eat it?”

His head cocked to the side as did the Mavka’s.

“You wish to share your food with me?” the Mavka asked.

“I got it for you, Reia.”

“But I won’t be able to eat that much before it goes bad. I don’t know how to dry meat.” She shrugged as though she didn’t see any issue with this. “Plus, he is our guest. We should feed him if we have food to share, and you should eat as well.”

But nothing will satisfy our hunger. No matter how much they ate, no matter how much they tried, they would always be hungry. It never ended, never let up, and no Mavka knew how to fix this problem they all faced.

“He is leaving soon,” Orpheus told them, making sure they both understood he wouldn’t allow another to linger near his home.

“About that,” Reia said with a little pout. Every time her bottom lip stuck forward, Orpheus had an overwhelming urge to lick it back into place. “He has something he wants to ask you. A favour.”

Orpheus tilted his head at him in question, and he stood to come a little closer.

“I want to do what you both have told me.” Then he gestured to them. “I want *this.* My own human.”

“And I told you how to do that. Where you must begin.”

He turned his eyes to Reia, making Orpheus follow his gaze. “But she has told me that I need to build a hut because humans will not like my cave. There are things I need.”

“What is it you are asking for?”

Hadn’t Orpheus done enough to help this Mavka? He’d given him salt, the seeds to grow dill, had given him advice.

“I have never been to the Demon village. I do not know what I am supposed to do there.”

“And you want *me* to take you?”

“Yes. You have been there.”

“No,” he bit, placing his hands around Reia and bringing her closer to be firmer between his spread thighs. “I will not leave her for that long.”

He wouldn’t have considered it before this day, and he definitely wouldn’t now after knowing she’d been attacked by a Demon within the circle. She was brave, too brave. She was a threat to herself, and Orpheus refused to leave her here by herself for *days* just to help this Mavka.

“Then take me with you,” Reia suggested, staring down at him since he was seated lower than her in her standing position.

“We are not ready for that.” In actuality, he wasn’t ready for that. He needed to make sure she would be safe since he’d been foolish with the last human he’d taken there. There was only one way to guarantee her safety and *she* wasn’t ready for it. “It’s too dangerous.”

She gave him a small smile.

“But wouldn’t it be safer if both of you were there to protect me?” She quickly turned her head to the Mavka. “You’ve already done it once. You would do it again, wouldn’t you?”

He held her a little tighter. *She is mine to protect.*

“Yes, I will help protect Reia human person.”

“He speaks your name?” He nearly growled, his eyes swirling with red, before green, and then back to remain crimson.

Anger. Possessiveness. Jealousy. All these emotions were unpleasant and unwanted.

“The point, Orpheus.” She grabbed one of his horns and started shaking his head. It was the first time she’d ever touched them and he wished she’d do it more often. “Wouldn’t it be the safest if you had someone else looking

out for me? It’s two birds, one stone. I get to see the Demon village, and you get to help him.”

“But I don’t want to help him.”

He was rather angry he was here.

“That’s not very nice.”

“I am Mavka,” he chuckled mockingly. “When have we been known to be nice?”

“You are usually,” she argued, shoving at his chest to get away from his arms. “I thought you wanted to make me happy.”

“Yes, always, but I will not take you there yet.”

“But you took the other human there.”

“That was different.”

He’d been stupid, and him taking that woman there had begun the path of him losing her.

“Fine,” she snapped before folding her arms across her chest. “Then go without me, but I want you to help him.”

“But I already told you I don’t want to help him, and I don’t want to leave you alone here since you don’t know how to stay inside.”

“What if I promise I will?”

He shook his head. “It is a long journey, and I do not trust that you will.”

“You don’t trust me?” She waved her hands to the side, gesturing towards the ground with all her fingers pointing downwards. “I promised to stay and here I am, keeping my promise.”

“I trusted you in this, to stay,” he answered. He’d been worried the entire time, but he’d chosen to have faith in her, only to discover she’d gotten injured. “But you are never where you are supposed to be.”

She was always outside when he told her not to be when he wasn’t around. She was always near the salt circle when he’d told her to stay away from it. She’d even gotten between him and this very Mavka when he’d warned her to move.

“You will come outside even if you promise not to. You will —” Before he could finish speaking, she walked past him to go up the steps with heavy footsteps.

Her fists were clenched beside her, her back rigid in posture with her teeth gritted. Even her lips were pressed tight together.

He’d never seen these things from her before.

“Reia?”

He turned to watch her, beginning to stand to follow. He flinched back when she stared at him straight in his glowing orbs, and then *slammed* the door shut.

Is she upset with me? He felt like she was upset with him.

He swiftly turned his head to the Mavka and snapped his jaws at him to make a sharp clipping sound.

“This is your fault.”

“What did I do wrong? I am not the one who said no.” He titled his head at him. “I already asked her to come to the Demon village with me.”

“You did what?!” he roared with his orbs flashing red.

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With the sound of crackling from the remaining embers of the fire that had been lit to warm Reia, Orpheus paced in the living room area. The dull light did little to illuminate the house since most of the candles had been extinguished.

She was asleep now, bathed, fed, safe, but Orpheus was restless.

She will not speak to me. Ever since she'd stormed inside earlier, Reia refused to talk to him unless absolutely necessary.

When he came inside to place the deer on the table for her, she didn't thank him, didn't smile, didn't even look towards him. All she said was that she'd throw what she didn't want outside for them to eat when she was done. Then she'd grabbed a blade, and Orpheus had left to make sure he and the Mavka were far enough away inside the salt circle that the scent of its blood wasn't too overwhelming.

He'd had to distract the Mavka, whose snout kept turning towards the house, by grabbing him around his nose so all he could smell was him. Orpheus had better control over his will power as long as he wasn't too close to the source.

Orpheus told him to hold his breath when the door was opening and to wait until she was finished dumping what she didn't want. She needed to leave the protections of the

house, and he'd been worried she would come to harm if he hadn't been able to control him.

Then Orpheus let him have it all. He didn't need it like the injured Mavka did.

When everything was eaten and the Mavka had calmed from his eating frenzy – Orpheus watched him attack the barrier for Reia but did nothing because he knew she was protected within, although it did make his hackles rise – he'd called out to her about the beehive.

She told him to place it on the table inside like he had with the deer. He'd begun to grow concerned because she was glaring at him, her lips thinned, and her eyebrows drawn together tightly. Reia hadn't glared at him since the beginning.

She allowed him to watch her drain the honey into jars. His nose let out sneezing huffs at the intense sweetness he could smell, but she wouldn't answer any of his questions about it.

She'd ignored him.

She had ignored him all day. His questions, his presence, everything. She even spoke more words to the Mavka outside who still lingered while he waited for his wounds to heal than she had to him.

Her bath had been silent. She didn't twitch. Didn't ask him to touch her intimately like she had every time for the past week. Once he was finished, feeling a deep well of disappointment because Orpheus liked making her feel good, he'd left.

She'd cooked her dinner and ate in her room. He knew she'd gone to sleep when she didn't emerge, and he peeked inside to see her curled up under the furs.

He clutched his spiralling horns, a quiet whine wheezing from his chest. *Why will she not be with me like before?* Reia had never been this way with him, even in the beginning.

She was acting like all the other humans he'd brought here, those that didn't want him near them. It was like she

detested him.

He touched at his chest with the tip of a claw, not understanding why he felt pain around his heart. His sight was a deep blue and had been for quite some time.

This was not how he imagined his return would be.

His pacing didn't cease throughout the night, his mind and body restless. He wanted to go into her room and wake her, to fix her so she would be like before, but he wouldn't. He didn't want to disturb her rest.

What did I do wrong? He didn't know what part of their conversation had made her this way.

He hoped that after she slept she would speak with him, so when she finally emerged from her room, he stood frozen in the living area and held his breath in anticipation. She would always say good morning with a little smile and ask how he'd rested.

Reia walked down the hallway with her eyes on him. When she reached the open space that was the kitchen area, she turned her chin up at him and turned to the counter before reaching for a wooden cup to press it into the bucket of fresh water so she could drink.

His heart sunk, and his breath came out a stuttering mess.

Orpheus came forward.

"Why will you not speak to me?"

She was ignoring him to the point she didn't even reply.

She didn't move away from him when he got closer, but that seemed much worse, like she was ignoring the very existence of him rather than scuttling to get away. She was like a ghost that was haunting him.

When she settled her finished drink down, he reached for her, wanting to cup the side of her face.

"Don't touch me," she bit as she smacked his hand away.

Orpheus flinched, backing down until he was crouching to be smaller and needed to place one of his hands on the ground to support himself. She'd never done that to him before, had never told him to not touch her. This wasn't the

same woman who had only stopped him from licking at her neck the day before because he'd been tickling her.

A small whine wheezed in his chest.

"What did I do wrong, Reia?"

"You hurt my feelings," she answered, folding her arms across her chest and giving him her side.

His gut twisted like his intestines were tying into knots. *I hurt her?* He felt the acidic burn of guilt in his stomach.

"Is it because I won't help the Mavka?"

"That is part of it." Her voice was deep and cold, slicing away at him like a blade.

"Then what else is wrong?"

He couldn't understand what else he'd done to upset her.

"You really can't figure it out?" She turned her head to eye him over, raising a brow with a mouth that was twisted with a sneer. She faced him fully when he shook his head to answer her. "You said you didn't trust me, Orpheus!"

He shrunk further at her shout, this little human making him retreat.

"But I do trust you," he quickly said.

"I promised that if you took him to the Demon village that I would stay inside, and you said that I wouldn't!" She threw her hands forward. "When I promise something, I generally mean it."

He took a hesitant step forward, reaching his hand out to her, but safe enough distance away that she wouldn't smack it.

"But you will go outside, Reia. You will need to get food from the garden."

Her brows twitched like she hadn't thought of that.

"But we can collect all the food I need before you leave so I don't have to."

Orpheus shook his head. "The village is towards the heart of the Veil. It is a four day walk just to get there, even for me. Your food will rot by the time I am coming back."

Her face paled a little, her brows drawing together. “You would be gone for eight days? It’s really that far away?”

He took another step forward, desperate to be closer to her, to smell her scent when it was just coming off her skin, to be in reaching distance so he could touch her.

“Yes. Our home is near the border of the Veil.” He managed to slip his hand under the hem of her skirt and wrap it around one of her calves, feeling a tremor of relief when she didn’t pull away from him and he was able to feel her skin. “I trust that you would stay inside, Reia, but this is a promise you cannot make. You will need to get more food and would be stuck inside for eight days, and that is only if something doesn’t go wrong on the journey.”

“Then I will only go outside to get food and come straight back.”

Orpheus slowly started to rise, slipping his hand up her leg until he was almost at her thigh, then he let her dress fall so he could hold her side.

“I will not be here to place the salt circle if it breaks. If its windy or if it rains, you won’t be able to go outside at all.”

“I-I can fix it myself, Orpheus.”

His eyes flashed bright crimson.

“*Never,*” he growled lightly, staring down at her. “You are to never go near the circle if it is broken.”

Her beautiful green eyes bowed, and she began to nibble at her bottom lip. “But I want you to help him.”

He shot forward and startled her when he caged her against the kitchen counter with his arms.

“Do you care for that Mavka?”

His sight deepened in its reddened colour, his growl becoming more prominent as he rumbled from his chest constantly. *Does she care for him more than me?* The idea of it made those invisible hands sweep over his brain, caressing it like they might start squeezing it and force him into madness.

“You are *mine*, little human. I will not let him take you from me.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“You are mine!” he roared, feeling his fins and fur trying to raise beneath his shirt. Those hands gave their first tentative squeeze, and he felt himself growing more agitated by the second. “Only I can touch you, hold you, smell you, taste you. You are my human, and if I cannot have you, then no Mavka can!”

Reia reached up and cupped his snout in comfort, but a part of him had wanted to bite at her hand in aggression. To show her that if he couldn’t have her, then he’d eat her. He didn’t, had to snuff the violent urge in him as not to harm her. He dug his claws into the wooden counter and felt himself slicing through the timber.

“Shhh, shhh,” she soothed, brushing her hand over the bone of his snout. “It’s okay. I only care about you, Orpheus. I’m not going to leave with him, ever. I promise.”

She was pacifying him… and it was working. He nuzzled into her hands, pleased to feel them on him as he closed his sight just to bask in their softness, their warmth.

“It’s just… I feel bad for him.” He opened his sight, his vision back to normal under her caring touches. “He is lonely, and pretty stupid. It’ll be a long time before he finds a human if he stays this way. He lives in a cave, Orpheus. No one will want to live like that.”

“So? He will learn, just as I have.”

“Don’t you feel bad for him?”

Her brows were creased together once more, and her bottom lip was doing that pouting thing.

“No,” he answered truthfully, unable to stop the urge to lean forward and lick that pout away.

She laughed, but even he could hear it lacked any true humour.

“You have all this humanity in you, and yet you can’t even sympathise with a creature just like yourself.” She brushed

her forehead against the tip of his snout. “Orpheus, you have been alone for a long time, yes?”

“*Eons*,” he rasped.

“And you have lost many humans? You miss them, don’t you? You’re sad that they’re gone, and that you couldn’t protect them, even from yourself.”

“Yes,” he grated, feeling the familiar pang of emptiness and guilt in his heart.

“If it were possible, wouldn’t you have wished for someone to give you the answers you needed? For someone to help you so you didn’t have to lose them?”

“Of course, but then I wouldn’t have you.”

He would have kept another human, and they wouldn’t have been his little Reia.

She backed her head away, the smallest smile curling her lips. *She is smiling at me again.* He almost groaned in satisfaction.

“But what if I had come sooner then? What if I came near the beginning when you hadn’t learned everything you had and you hurt me?”

White flashed in his orbs. If Reia had been the first offering he’d brought here, he would have frightened her with his actions. He’d learned to be hesitant around humans because he’d upset many of them. He knew to give them space, to not sniff them or try to hold them like he wanted to.

She must have known by his eye colour change that he understood.

“That’s what I’m saying. You are leading him on the path to being hurt like you are. He will lose many, and he’ll be sad. What if he loses the one human that might be able to accept him? You will have aided his pain, and that’s not fair.”

Orpheus thought for long moments. Sympathy for another wasn’t something he was used to feeling, but he’d often felt sympathy for himself. He’d *longed* to remove his own pain,

to not feel lonely, forsaken, and desolate. He had wished that someone would help him gain a human's heart.

Am I the one who can spare this for another Mavka?

Orpheus could never take back his past, couldn't change it, so was he the one who had to go through all this just to help others of his kind? That didn't seem fair to him.

However, it did make him understand her plea.

"But if I take him to the village, you will not be safe."

"Please, Orpheus? He needs to wear clothes, he needs to build his own house, he needs to learn. He'll scare my kind away as he is now. He's stupid and overtly inquisitive, but these things will help."

His heart thumped heavily in his chest, feeling like the thunder of a lightning storm as its loud bangs vibrated throughout his body.

"I would not be able to leave you here."

She would be unprotected, and he'd be afraid for her the entire time. Eight days away from Reia sounded like hell, not knowing if she was safe but also not being able to be in her presence. He'd miss her like a terrible ache.

"Then take me with you," she pleaded. "I'm not afraid, and you said you could disguise me."

"We are not ready for me to take you there."

"But you took the other human there." Her lips thinned as she narrowed her eyes. "Why am I so different?"

"Because I made a mistake in taking her there. She left me since it was discovered I had found a companion and she was living with me."

"You said you might take me there, so when were you going to? In a month, a year? I already told you I wanted to go."

"It is not about how long, Reia," he answered, reaching up to brush her long strands through his claws, enjoying the feel of them crawling through his fingers.

"Then when?"

He wanted to answer, to give her the truth.

He remained silent.

She started pushing at his chest to get away from him. *She is upset with me again.* She would be like before, where she would ignore him.

“No,” he snapped, caging her in again. “Do not be upset with me. I don’t like it.”

“Then tell me when.”

When he didn’t answer, she folded her arms and turned to give him her side to show that she could ignore him even when he was caging her in.

“Reia,” he warned, red fray the edges of his vision. She had the bravery to turn her chin up at him. Once more, his growl emitted from his chest. “When you are my bride.”

“Excuse me?” she squeaked in a high-pitch, her head turning to him as her eyes widened. “I-I never said I would be your bride.”

“Only when you accept me, give me your soul and remain with me eternally, will I take you to the Demon village.” His heart thumped for the very day, the tentacles of his cock stirring in anticipation. “Only when you are mine, heart, body, and soul, when you cannot leave me and do not want to, will I take you there.” He leaned forward, digging his claws into the counter. His tongue darted out to lick at the fangs of his snout, his cock stiffening behind his seam, and his tentacles had to clasp it tightly to stop it from extruding. “I yearn for it, my little doe.”

He *hungered* for it more than he did her body.

The first step was being inside her. To have her accept him willingly, welcomingly, achingly into her body. For her cunt to sheath his cock in its warmth, its wetness, to fill every inch of her until she could take no more, and then still give it to her.

For her to want his body, to desire it, to need him surrounding her as he took her. Orpheus needed her to cling to him, to want to be connected to him, and then burn for him to do it again, and again, and *never* be satisfied.

He’d long ago realised that in order to obtain the gift of a human’s soul, he had to earn it by gaining their body and their heart.

If he could claim her body, only when she told him he wanted her to, could he win her heart? Orpheus had never been loved, and he wanted her to love him. For it to be Reia that allowed him to have her so completely that she could never leave him.

Her face had grown paler, her mouth opening and closing as though she couldn’t form the words she wanted to.

Orpheus knew they were rejections.

“I cannot force you, Reia,” he said gently. “This is something you must chose, but this is what I want.”

“C-couldn’t I just be your companion? You said that’s all you were looking for now.”

He pulled his embedded claws of one hand from the counter and cupped the side of her face.

“That was before, when I didn’t think you would ever accept me, just as the others hadn’t.” Then he scraped his claws over her neck, her shoulder, and then down her chest to watch her nipple bud for him before he even reached it. “But you like my touch. This gives me hope.”

Her hands shot forward to grab his before he could caress that sensitive point.

“If you don’t help him, Orpheus, then I never will.”

He tilted his head, not understanding why the other Mavka would prevent her from doing so. “Why not?”

“Because you are being selfish and cruel to him. I would never want to give myself to someone like that. I would never forgive you for it.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“No, and that is a promise.”

His eyes flashed white at her words. *A promise?*

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Orpheus internally grumbled as he placed one of his black cloaks around Reia's body. It had been shortened and altered to fit her.

He now had to help the Mavka or possibly lose Reia's affections. So, he was doing it. He would take him to the Demon village so he could acquire what he needed, while showing him around so that he could go there by himself in the future.

That was an easy decision.

The one to do with Reia had been more difficult. To leave her here by herself where she could be harmed, or bring her with him so that he knew she was protected?

Both were dangerous.

He'd been troubled for a few hours, feeling her drawing away from him as he paced around the house and yard, keeping a watchful eye on the Mavka he told to stay.

His choice had been difficult but, in the end, he chose the one that was less dangerous for her.

So here he was, dressing Reia in one of his cloaks while she wore the remaining material as a black dress to hide her body, with the intention of bringing her with them despite his aversion to doing so.

He didn’t like this, that he chose to bring her to the village even though she wasn’t his bride and eternally tied to him. She wouldn’t be truly safe and could be taken from him.

Knowing that the Mavka would be with them and had sworn to protect her did ease some of his inner turmoil.

Her smile when he told her had been unusually bright as it beamed from her delicate, pretty face. *She is so lovely to behold,* he thought at the time. He ached for this female in so many different ways that it stirred both his heart and his body.

They were setting off immediately. There was no reason to wait.

She’d packed a shoulder strap bag with enough food to survive the journey to the Demon Village since he told her they’d be able to obtain more while they were there. They also placed a sack of water inside the bag they could fill along the way. They’d be following the stream that ran all the way through the Veil.

While she packed, Orpheus had taken a large chunk of crystal from his room, one that was the same as those in the washing room, and took it outside. He smashed it to pieces.

When she’d asked him why, he said he would be using it to trade with. He didn’t usually need this much, but the Mavka had nothing to trade with and he was hoping Reia might like something as well. Trading it meant little to him as he had plenty of it.

Once the preparations were done, he’d washed her, so the spell was fresh, and then dressed her.

There was only one last thing to do now, and she’d looked unsure as he started to place the head of the deer he’d brought for her over her head.

“What’s this for?” she asked, her voice echoing inside the skull that had been peeled of flesh and cleaned.

“Your disguise, so you can see but not be seen.”

She couldn’t show her face. Her pale skin would give away she was human.

He started tying cloth straps to it and her so that it would stay fixed in place but could also be removed during the journey. She only needed it when they were close to the Demon village, and he needed to permanently keep her hidden.

He should have done this when he'd taken the last human to the Demon village. He hadn't known she'd been spotted looking around underneath a large cloak hood, but they'd been left alone while inside the village. He'd thought all was well.

"There, now you look like a Mavka," he said, before leaning down to nuzzle his snout against her neck underneath the skull mask.

"Aren't I a bit short to pass off as one of you?"

He made a thoughtful noise. "A female Mavka, then?"

"There are females?"

Orpheus shrugged as he leaned back and stared at her through the eye holes.

"I don't know. I have never seen one."

He walked around her and jiggled the sword strapped to her back. It would look odd that she had one, but he didn't think the Demons would look twice. They liked shiny things and would assume she did too. That's why his crystals were good for trade.

A sense of foreboding and dread washed over him as they stepped towards the door to leave. *I don't want to do this.* But he wanted Reia, and that's what pushed him forward.

The Mavka came closer to the porch on all fours and reached out to touch the deer mask that hid her face. The hood was buttoned around the antlers so they could stick up out of the material like his did. Orpheus' Impala antlers were only two horned spikes and could fit through the holes, her disguise had forking branches.

He was actually a little disappointed she looked more like the Mavka than himself.

“She looks like Mavka,” he said with awe, stroking a claw over it when they were through the barrier.

Orpheus grabbed his wrist and threw his arm away.

“Do not touch her.” *Or anything she is wearing.*

She unbuttoned the cloak hood and slung the mask off so she could hand it to him.

“I guess it works,” she laughed.

He tied it around his waist to carry it for her.

“How do you wish for me to carry you?”

She turned her head up to look at him while fixing the hood back over her head to hide herself. “Carry me?”

“Yes.” He gestured down to her legs. “You will be too slow. It is a four day walk for us. You will make it longer, and I do not want you to be out of the protections for such an unnecessary length of time.”

The quicker they did this, the better it’d be.

“Could you carry me on your arm again?”

“No,” he answered, shaking his head slightly. “You will be too close to the trees and will be easily spotted.”

She folded her arms over her chest before reaching up to stroke her lips. Her soft lips that had felt remarkable against his face and chest when she’d kissed him. *I want to play with her tongue again.* The fact she’d licked his tongue had brought him joy.

He’d never had a human do that before. It had felt like it was his first real kiss that he could return.

“Your back then?” She eyed his cloak. “I’m guessing you want me to be under it. Will my head fit inside your cloak with yours?”

He loosened the ties and nodded. Then he crouched down and waited for her to crawl underneath it and poke her head through.

“Hello,” she greeted, and although he couldn’t see her face, he could tell by the tone in her voice that she had a smile. “I’m very close to you.”

She kissed the side of his neck, right behind the round of his jaw. A thrill ran through him, sending a tremor through his body.

He stood when she cradled his sides with her legs, bending her knees when he threaded his arms through them.

“You’re a little big to fit between my legs,” she laughed. “Sorry you have to reach so far back.”

I will have them around me. She was straddling his back, but Orpheus was determined to have her straddle the front of him while his cock was buried deep inside her.

He let out a pant at the thought, his tentacles shifting slightly behind his seam.

“Let’s go,” he told them, his voice a little more strained than before.

They set out, Orpheus filling with unease as he crossed through the salt circle. *I will keep her safe and hidden.* He turned his sight to the Mavka walking beside them, easily keeping up with his long strides, without his own cloak. He would need one for the future.

Then they entered the forest. Although it wasn’t too late to turn back, he knew he couldn’t.

The journey was long and with very little pause.

They were walking through constant shadows, the canopy of trees above enveloping them in darkness no matter if it was night or day. It was relatively quiet as he didn’t usually go this way, and they had very little Demon interaction the further they went.

None suspected he had a human with him hidden underneath his cloak and the moment they left the border ring of the Veil, the less dangerous it became.

The Veil’s properties were filled with invisible rings of life. The border ring held those who were crazed for human flesh, living inside this section so they only had a short journey to scour the surface and hunt – with little success.

It had only taken a day to pass it and some of his distress lessened.

It took two days to leave the next ring that held those who hunted humans but were not as desperate for it. They ate irregularly, only when they were starving, and they would consume the first life they found – whether that was human or animal. They didn’t care as long as their hunger was sated.

They were typically medium-sized Demons with a little more thought. There was also less of them, their numbers growing smaller the further in they went.

Orpheus led them along the stream that eventually turned into a slow moving, but deep river.

The Mavka asked them both various questions, inquisitive about their relationship and what his future could hold if he found his own female. Some had been a little too personal, him not understanding what a boundary was. Orpheus had to snap his jaws at him frequently, especially when Reia squirmed on his back when clearly uncomfortable.

They only stopped for a few hours during the night so that one of the Mavka could sleep. It was a long journey with lots of walking. One of them needed to rest while the other looked out for any signs of trouble or danger, only to switch the following night.

Orpheus cradled Reia in his arm each time to allow her to sleep comfortably whether he was the one watching or the one sleeping. Choosing to trust the Mavka had made him restless. He wouldn’t have slept if he were by himself, but he needed to have his strength so he could protect her.

She also slept while she was clinging to him as he walked. She often had to move around him, going from straddling his back to being carried in his arms since her body cramped due to the strain. She asked to walk for a few minutes here and there, and he allowed it for brief periods.

By the third day, Reia groaned on his back, tilting her head backwards and pulling on his hood which put pressure

on where it was caught around his horns.

“This is so boooring,” she whined. “Why did I even ask to come?”

“I would not have left you behind, Reia.”

He would have if the option had been better.

“It’s so far away. Being able to walk sometimes would have made this easier.”

He wished he could turn his head to see her, but if he did, his long snout would smack her in the face, and he *still* wouldn’t be able to see.

“But you would have tired yourself out. How would that have been easier?”

“Yeah, but at least I’d be *doing* something.” She moved the hand she had been using to hold onto him from his neck to rub her face. “There isn’t even something to look at. It’s just trees. Lots and lots of trees and mist. This is the most boring thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. I thought living alone in my house had been boring, but this tops that.”

“You lived by yourself? But there were many people in your village.”

“I told you, Orpheus,” she said quietly, wrapping her arm back around his neck so she could be closer. “They thought I was the harbinger of bad omens. They hated me and shunned me. No one spoke to me, and they built me a house on the outskirts of the town right inside the wall to keep me away.”

He had not known this. He hadn’t asked her much about her life with the humans since he wanted her to focus on the here and now, that she was with him and no longer with them. He didn’t want to remind her of where she’d come from in case she tried to go back.

“It was so boring being by myself all the time. I had to find shit to do to keep myself entertained.”

He looked at the ground as he walked while contemplating her words. He couldn’t imagine humans shunning one of

their own. They usually fought so fiercely to protect each other.

They abandoned her?

“Were… you lonely?”

Had she been like him, filled with the same pain that had lingered inside him for hundreds of years?

“Eh.” He felt her shrug. “I was at first, when I was young, but I got over it. There was nothing I could do about it and no point on fixating on it.”

He chuckled. That was a very Reia thing for her to say. *She is such a strong creature.* So resilient, despite what had happened to her.

“Have I ever told you that your fur is really soft?” she asked, rubbing her face against the long, wolfish fur around his neck.

She was changing the subject, and he happily allowed it.

She likes my fur. His eyes glowed a bright yellow, making the Mavka next to him step back in uncertainty at his sudden emotion change.

“We should stop here for now,” he said to them both when they reached a small space between the trees. “We have passed into the border of the village. We will not be able to rest from here on out.”

“Thank goodness,” she sighed, dropping her legs so he would put her down. She stretched, reaching her arms above her head while going to the tips of her toes. Then she dug into her bag. “I’m also really hungry.”

She always reached her hand out to grab the hem of his cloak, keeping a hold of him as it was the dark of night and she couldn’t see. She’d been distressed the first night and only found comfort when she knew she was holding onto something of him.

When he had to move away from her to scout the area himself to make sure they weren’t near any Demons, she always remained on the spot. When he returned, her hand

came towards him even if the other Mavka came close as well, knowing exactly who was who.

He returned from scouting the area when she had just finished eating.

“We will arrive at the village tomorrow,” he said as she grabbed a hold of him. “Are you ready for your bath?”

He washed her each day in the stream, making sure the Mavka couldn’t see her naked body as he circled the forest around them to keep watch.

Nodding, she allowed him to brace her as she blindly and trustingly, walked with him towards the stream. She winced when something sharp dug into her foot.

“Will there be shoes you can get me there?”

Reia had lost her shoes on the way to the Veil and there weren’t any left behind by his other offerings that fit her feet. It wasn’t that she was too small, in fact, she had big, sturdy feet. They were still tiny in his large hands, quite cute with adorable little toes, but apparently big for a human woman.

“I will get you whatever you want,” he answered when they reached the edge of the river.

He rose his snout into the air, sniffing to double check there was no danger. Then he started to remove his cloak, shirt, and shoes. He thought it was better if he kept his pants on – more for his sense of self control rather than for her comfort.

Reia untied her cloak before lifting her black dress from her body.

Naked and bared to him, desire swirled in his gut as he raked his gaze down her. He didn’t think he wouldn’t ever not have that reaction when she was presented to him like this.

As much as he wanted to just stare at her body, to peruse it for his own enjoyment, she reached her hand out for him to take it. He could see, she could not, and the longer she

remained standing, the likelier the Mavka would catch a glimpse of her.

He took her hand, so little and fragile in his grip, and walked backwards to lead her into the cold stream. Orpheus removed the ceramic jar of oil with its lid tied to it from his pocket before he entered the water and placed it on the ground on the river's edge.

She always gasped at the temperature when her toes first touched the water, but she allowed him to help her in by the stream's short cliff edge.

"I'm starting to miss the tub at home," she whispered once she was fully submerged and had even dipped her head under to wet her hair. "The water isn't too bad, but I like my bath hot."

Orpheus worked to open the ceramic jar and dipped his fingers inside the oil to begin. He couldn't waste time. Reia was out in the open with no coverings.

"I am sorry," he apologised, wrapping his arm around her shoulders to give her some of his body heat. "But we must do it this way."

"It's okay. I understand."

She placed her hands on his sides to hold herself steady as he started to wash her shoulders, arms, hands, and then face and neck. Her body shivered when he scraped his claws over her scalp as he washed her hair.

No matter if he was rushing or not, touching her always made his vision turn purple in lust and his cock stir and begin to harden. Orpheus wanted what he could not have yet, and it burned within him, crushing his resolve.

The little moan she gave when he rubbed his hands over her breasts, feeling her nipples were already hard – whether that was from his touch or the cold – caused his body to stiffen further. He lingered a little longer than he should have, brushing his thumbs over each one at the same time just so she would twitch.

Her legs brushed against his in the water as he watched her blonde brows twitch and her lips part.

It took everything in him to move away, to not play with her soft breasts the way he wanted to. She hadn't asked him to, and he shouldn't be trying to tease her when they were in the forest.

"Y-you know," she stuttered quietly after he dipped his fingers again and started working down her sides and abdomen. "This is a little more intimate than at home."

Her breaths came in pants, and her body stretched when he was slipping past her navel.

"What do you mean?"

He didn't see how this could be more intimate when they were currently in a cold stream.

"Because you are facing me." She reached up and cupped the corners of his jaws. "And all I can see is your face and the glowing of your eyes." Stifling a noise as one of his hands delved between her thighs, her eyes bowed as she looked up to him. "All I can feel is your hands." Then she whispered so softly that even he barely heard it, "It reminds me of some of my dreams."

His hands paused when he was washing her back. He tilted his head at her, unsure if he'd heard correctly.

"You have dreamt of me?" Pinkness lifted into her cheeks, and she nodded, bowing her head to hide it from him. "Of me touching you?"

She nodded against his chest and heavens help him, his cock almost extruded immediately. Purple deepened in his vision, and he held back the groan that almost came from him at the tightness of his tentacles holding his shaft back. His hips started twitching at the torturous battle that began within his body, crimpling the water around him.

He leaned forward and sniffed at her neck, taking in her elderberry and red rose scent directly, before licking at her wet skin. *I want her. She tempts me.* She had no idea just how hard Orpheus was holding back.

Such words were dangerous because every day, every time he touched her, he feared his control was going to slip.

And yet, as he was slipping his hands down her legs, he couldn't stop himself from asking, "Do I make you come in your dreams?"

She turned her head down to him as he knelt so he could reach her calves, almost drowning himself. Thankfully, she lifted her leg so that he could wash her foot. She nodded, and he licked at his snout to show his interest in her, in this conversation, as if his glowing purple eyes weren't enough.

"With just my hands?" She shook her head when he started to wash the other. "My tongue as well?"

Her cheeks reddened, and she nodded. He shuddered, wanting to taste the sweet aroma of her arousal again.

Only once had he, and he craved the delicious taste of it, his mouth watering whenever he smelt her desire. Even though he couldn't smell it because of the water, he now knew that scent by pure memory, and he started salivating for it.

I want to lick her. I shouldn't.

He drew his tongue up and over her chest, just missing her breasts by going through the valley between them as he stood. That was enough to satisfy the need to taste her in some form.

Orpheus towered over her while placing his hands on either side of the riverbed to cage her in.

"Anything else, Reia?"

His heart was pumping heavily in his body, racing liquid fire through his veins.

Her only answer was her bringing her lips within her mouth to bite down on them. His claws sunk into the dirt as he curled his fingers in tension.

She has dreamt of my cock. He didn't need anything else. Her lack of response was enough for him to know.

He groaned before he leaned down to press his face against the crook of her neck and shoulder.

“You make it so hard for me to resist you,” he whispered with his voice hoarse, the strain of the battle behind his seam growing more violent.

But her bath was over, her human scent hidden to all, and they should leave the water so she could cover her body from the potential of a Demon spotting her.

“Do you want to touch me, Orpheus?”

Her smile was haunting when he raised his head, knowing that she meant inside and not just how he had.

“*Always.*”

She knew he desired her, there was no point in lying about it.

Her voice was soft and sweet as she whispered, “If you think it is safe, I would like you to.”

Fuck, I don’t care if it’s safe.

He did, but his need to feel her was too great. It had been days since he last had. He’d listen out, and he had the Mavka scouting the area for them. What would a little longer matter?

He slipped his arm between her and the wet rock and dirt wall, kneeling so he could be at her level. He didn’t want her above the surface of the water.

Quick. We must be quick. He dabbed his tongue over the pulsing flesh over her jugular, caressing one of her breasts so he could feel it, hold it, play with her stiff nipple that always made her breath hitch.

I have never touched her while facing her before.

It allowed him to lift her just enough that her breasts emerged, and he could sweep his tongue down her chest. He brushed his hand lower, letting his claws lightly tickle her skin, as he licked across one of her breasts, feeling her nipple move across his tongue.

Her hands wrapped around his head and pulled him closer. He swirled his long tongue around it, teasing it as he slipped his exploring fingers into the lips of her folds to find the hard nub of her clit that was already swollen.

She felt slippery, but he knew the water would erase it in time. He removed his hand to dip his fingers into the oil before bringing his hand back under the water and pressing two inside her.

She stretched around them with a moan, her back arching. He pumped them, staring up at her as she bit her bottom lip while he played with her breast and her quivering insides. Her textured pussy was beckoning him with its little pulses and spasming clenches. It was perfect, and he wanted it. His cock ached for it.

He couldn't. Even if she asked for it now, he couldn't enter her here, in the forest. He could touch her, still had enough thought to be listening out, to smell beyond her, but if she was wrapped around him, he knew he'd lose all touch with his senses except for everything about her.

Placing his thumb against her needy clit that he'd discovered she adored him petting, the momentum of his fingers moving in and out of her channel rubbed it, and he tried to go in a circle at the same time to stroke her everywhere.

Her legs twitched, and she let out a soft cry.

Green flashed in his vision before returning to purple.

"Quiet, Reia."

"I-I'm sorry," she whispered with a shiver rolling through her.

She covered her mouth with a shaking hand, and her eyes rolled shut when he stroked her just right. Orpheus shuddered at watching her.

From the front, he told himself, increasing the speed of his fingers in his own excitement. *I'll bathe her facing her from now on.*

He'd always felt her reactions, but watching her features twist and contort was erotic. Her brows were twitching, her lips had been opening and closing when she was panting before she covered them. Her eyes were twinkling like they

were wetter than normal, and she was staring straight at him.

He was in her sights, and she was looking at him as he pleasured her beautiful and sensual body.

He moved his fingers like a wave, stroking her inner walls right where it dipped the most and her legs always kicked out. A sharp cry left her lips, loud even behind her hands.

Orpheus growled, moving away from her breast to move her hand so he could lick across her lips.

“Quiet, Reia,” he demanded again. “Only I can hear those sounds.”

He didn’t want the Mavka hearing her moans, her voice as she panted. He didn’t want another knowing her pleasure. It was only for Orpheus to hear.

“It feels good,” she whimpered. “A-and I think I’m about to come.” She shook her head. “I don’t think I can hold them in.”

She’d been doing a poor job of it the entire time.

Orpheus dipped his tongue between her lips, seeing if she would allow him to slip it inside. She parted them, and he pressed it in, tasting her moans and muffling her noises as his fingers moved faster.

He twirled his tongue around hers, elated that she was trying to do the same even if she froze occasionally from his fingers thrusting.

“Nnhh,” she moaned, her eyes clenching shut as she twitched heavily enough her shoulders swayed. Her breathing became erratic.

When he knew she was about to orgasm, Orpheus moved his free hand from around her to cup the back of her head, licking her tongue, the inside of her cheeks, even her teeth with his own flat tongue. He was bracing her, knowing what was about to happen as she tried to tilt her head back.

Her pussy clamped around his fingers. Just before she could scream out her moan, Orpheus shoved his tongue deeper. He slipped it down her throat, groaning in bliss at

the feeling, the taste of her saliva, at everything, as he cut off the sound completely.

Her body milked his fingers in wet spasms, harder now that her body was tense from his tongue. Her legs shot forward to wrap around his thighs as she bucked and thrashed.

His cock shot forward, extruding to the length of his tentacles as they wrestled to keep his fully engorged shaft from sprouting completely. Reia was coming hard, and he wanted to replace his fingers with his cock so he could feel her do it around that. To try and milk him for his seed, rather than his fingers that could give her nothing.

He slipped a third finger inside when she was growing lax, letting her feel a taste of the girth he would give if he was to fill her. He retracted his tongue to let her breathe through her mouth rather than her nose so she could catch her breaths.

Her body thumped around his digits along with her heartbeat, and he revelled in just feeling the flutter.

Only when he knew she had completely come down from her orgasm, did he pull his fingers from her.

Her hands fell through the water and accidentally brushed the backs of his tentacles. She gasped. Her hands flung away in surprise before they came forward to cup him through his trousers.

“It came out?”

He hissed in a breath of agony and grabbed her hands so he could shove them against the riverbed. She grunted despite him trying to be gentle.

“Don’t touch,” he warned. “I’m barely holding back as it is.”

“But I want to.”

She was trying to torture him, she had to be. Such words were demanding to his resolve, him needing release as much as he’d enjoyed giving it.

“No,” he rasped, shaking his head as he rose to stand on shaking legs. Need was weakening his knees. “Not here. Only you.”

She bit her bottom lip, and he knew that meant she wanted to argue with him about it. He was thankful she eventually sighed and nodded in understanding.

Her brows knotted into a frown as her eyes bowed for him. “I’m sorry I can’t ease you.”

Orpheus leaned down and bumped her cheek with his snout. The gesture meant much, the fact she’d wanted to touch him again leaving a radiating swirl of tenderness in his heart to linger.

“We must return to the Mavka,” he told her.

She turned and he helped her out of the water so she could get to her hands and knees before standing. Orpheus nearly grabbed her thigh and yanked her back in when he saw the lips of her pussy and that empty little slit he wanted to stretch open so it didn’t appear so little anymore.

A tremor rolled through him, and he shoved his claws into the dirt, gouging and tearing into it as his tentacles nearly lost their fight to stop him from extending completely.

I want to fuck her so bad. I’d kill for it.

He shuddered violently, his eyes flashing red for a moment, as he attempted to keep his snarl quiet.

“Orpheus?” she asked when she turned around in the dark to find he hadn’t hopped out of the water to guide her. Thankfully, his eyes had already returned to purple before she’d looked upon him.

“Coming,” he growled, pressing the palm of his hand against the tip in an attempt to shove his cock back in.

It wouldn’t. He would have to bear the pain of his pants abrading the backs of his sensitive tentacles.

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Reia’s lips parted as she sucked in a sharp breath.

She was standing between both Duskwalkers on a small hill just on the edge of the forest, already wearing her skull mask disguise. Orpheus had been forced to carry her on his elbow due to her mask, but said it should be fine this close to the village as the Demons rarely hid in the trees this far into the Veil. The trees were also much taller here, and their lower branches were nowhere near reaching distance to her.

When they were about to break through the trees, he set her down and explained he couldn’t carry her anymore.

She hadn’t cared. She was too excited to see the village from a distance. Not expecting the scene before her, her feet froze as she took it in.

Bright sunshine covered an area at least a mile in diameter. There was a very short walk, a kind of grassy clearing that separated the forest and the village. However, the village itself had trees above it taller than any she’d ever heard of on Earth. Twisting sideways to create a spiral like that of a rose bud, wooden spikes, like thorns, broke through the canopy of trees and jutted towards the sky.

Even from the distance, she could tell those wooden spikes and trees created a perfect shield to keep the sun out inside the village to protect the Demons. They were so tall

that even with the distance between her and it, she knew the trees must be hundreds of metres tall.

“H-how is this possible?” she gasped, staring at the unbelievable scene. She ran forward a step as her eyes widened. “Wait... Is that a castle in the distance?”

While she was pointing in that direction, Orpheus quickly came up beside her and placed his hand on her shoulder.

“You need to stay with us, Reia.” She gave him an apologetic expression, and he turned up to face the castle that was off to the left and some distance behind the Village. “The Demon King is powerful and full of magic. He is stronger than any other creature, except perhaps the Witch Owl. He created this sun barrier for the village, and his castle highlights the centre of the Veil.”

“There’s a Demon King?!” she shouted before she quickly covered her mouth because of the loudness of her yell.

No freaking way!

“Yes. It’s believed that he was the one who broke through the barrier between the land of Demons and Earth and brought them here.” He pointed to the castle. “The portal is in his lands and Demons are free to come and go.”

“But why? Why would he bring them here?”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing!

The village of, apparently, intellectual Demons had been enough to tell her the world wasn’t what it seemed. But a fucking King of Demons? Now that seemed too farfetched.

“Food,” he answered, and it was so obvious she should have known.

Reia gestured to the village and castle. “How can humans not know about these things, though?”

He tilted his head, leaning lower to be slightly more eye level with her.

“Why should they? Demons don’t treat humans as anything more than meat. Even Mavka don’t normally speak to them. How would they have been told?”

“I don’t know,” she grumbled. “It’s just... Demons have been around for hundreds of years. We knew they arrived on Earth one day and that the world had been peaceful before then, but finding out about why? I just think we should have known about this by now.”

If it wasn’t for the Demons arriving on Earth, things would have progressed. They had just started making mechanical technology before the world had to go into hiding and continue living barbarically. No one could mine freely in the dark, so obtaining ore for guns and copper for the starting development of electricity, had fallen to the side.

All of this was now history.

Reia had always wondered how the world would have turned out if the Demons never came. Those who braved travelling long distances travelled either on foot or by horse-pulled carriages. Houses were made by clay-bricks or wooden timbers while being lit by fireplaces and candles. Just how different would the world have been if it had been allowed to evolve? If they could have light in their houses made from glass and wires like they’d started to?

“I did not know he had magic like this,” the Mavka said, gesturing to the village while crouching on one hand. “Or that it would look like that.”

Orpheus sighed, placing his hand over his bony face to rub his palm down it.

“Perhaps it was a terrible idea to bring you both here. Inside is not what you will expect either, and you cannot ask questions like this. You will be overheard and bring unwanted attention.” She could tell he was looking her over to check her disguise. “And you cannot be so loud, Reia. Your voice is very feminine, very human. You will have to whisper if you wish to speak, and you will have to hide your hands.”

Reia turned her head down to look at her bare palms. There had been no gloves that would fit her. She reached

inside and clenched the sides of her cloak to hold onto them before pointing and waving her hands inside it.

Okay, that'll work if I want to point or look at something.

"You both must be careful. Don't wander away from me, either one of you." Then he crouched down in front of her. "You must stay within my cloak at all times. Your disguise will help to hide what you are. You are right, you look like a short Mavka. The amulet you are wearing will not protect you from these Demons unless they touch it directly. They are some of the strongest." He reached up to cup the side of her neck, touching her skin directly in a comforting gesture. "But if there is something you want, tell me, and I will procure it for you. Anything, Reia. Ask for however much your heart contents. I have brought enough crystal to trade, and I can carry it all back no matter how large or heavy it is."

Heat warmed the skin over her cheek bones as a swirl of tenderness fluttered in her belly, like a torrent of butterflies. She went to rub her cheek against his bony one and accidentally bashed her mask against him.

"Oops, sorry," she laughed.

He chuckled in return.

"And be careful of making that noise. Demons here are more human than any you have ever met. They also laugh, but not like you. They will notice straight away."

"Should I just growl all the time, then?"

He chuckled a little louder this time, his jaw opening to allow it to echo. "Perhaps that will make your disguise more convincing."

After that, they set off to cross over the clearing that surrounded the village.

There were multiple entrances made by narrow gaps between the bases of the trees that were far more daunting up close. The base of each one was at least the size of their home and the yard surrounding it. She knew it would take *minutes* to walk around each one if she could. The bendy

roots were bigger than her in height to support their large, twisted bodies.

But inside the village? Reia's eyes nearly fell out of her damn skull.

It was *colourful.*

Strips of dyed cloth hung from the very centre of where the twisting tree canopy came together like a dull point before bending down and being lifted at the other ends to attach to the sides. Purple, red, blue, and yellow material fluttered.

Fire torches were lit so frequently that there was a source of light everywhere she looked, highlighting streets, lanes, buildings, and even their entrances. It left the area dim, but gave enough brightness that she could see clearly.

There were buildings made of wood and clay, tall with some having multiple levels. Some had signs like clothier, blacksmith, shoemaker, even a fucking florist.

It *looked* like her kind had made this place. The buildings, the carts of wares they were trying to sell, the houses painted in bright colours – although they seemed to favour the colour red. It looked like a village she could have travelled to that was further away from the Veil above the surface.

The further humans lived from the Veil, the bigger their towns or *cities* were and the more advanced they could be. She'd always wanted to travel to one that had large, unclimbable walls, and she wondered if they would have looked similar to this.

It looked human, as though at first glance she could have been mistaken – if it wasn't for all the Demons that walked around. But even they were strange and odd, so different from what she'd ever seen.

They were mostly human-shaped. Some had more animalistic feet, others had spikes or fur jutting out slightly, but their faces looked similar to her own. One might have large fangs around their lips while another had a pig-like

snout. A Demon who looked human except his horns walked past her, and she could see many others with different kinds of wings. Most of their skin was black like the void she was accustomed to, as if stars might begin to twinkle like the night sky, but some had patches of flesh. Some brown, and others pale like her.

None were completely human coloured, but it appeared as though they were starting to look like them. She suddenly realised they *were.* They had consumed enough of her kind to start looking like them, acting like them. Humanity. They were consuming humanity with each person and changing.

They were even wearing clothes, hats, and shoes!

Holy shit. This was so mind-boggling she feared her brain would burst from her skull in an explosion of information overload.

The Mavka, who had been instructed to stand on his back feet as much as possible, whined as he scratched at his snout.

“It smells here. It is too sweet.”

“That is a cloaking aroma to dilute the smell of blood and fresh meat,” Orpheus explained, keeping a firm arm around Reia hidden inside his cloak except for her head. “It helps to stop those who would become crazed by the scent of blood from going into a frenzy. You will shortly grow accustomed to it and grow thankful when we are closer to the markets.”

As they walked further in, the odd Demon walking around became many. They grunted, snorted, and gave lowing noises like cows. One laughed and it sounded like a bird squawking repeatedly.

“Is that music?” Reia whispered up to Orpheus so he could hear her over the bombardment of noises.

“Yes. They have mimicked everything and have figured out how to play instruments they have stolen.”

They’re actually not bad at it. Sure, it wasn’t perfect, but she thought they were better at it than she could ever be.

The music came from everywhere, and she looked up to the top of a house when she thought she heard the banging of a drum getting louder. She saw a lone Demon sitting on the tilted rooftop playing one with their hands.

They passed building after building, and she retreated into Orpheus when they were inside a small crowd of Demons. The sweet aroma she could smell completely diluted the usual scent of rotting decay. She barely smelt it. They were getting closer to the centre of the village from what she could tell by looking up, and she could smell the undertone of pastries wafting in the air that helped to pierce anything unpleasant.

She couldn't smell meat, but she could smell every other kind of food a human would cook.

In the distance, she thought she could see the twirling of fire like someone was doing a dance with fire poi or fire sticks.

I wasn't expecting this. Orpheus was right. There were shops, food stalls, and even entertainment. The Demons were *chatting* with each other, laughing their animalistic noises while shouting with bustle and excitement.

Curt growling next to her drew her frazzled attention.

It grew louder before an outright snarl broke out, and she saw that the Mavka's eyes were growing red. He stepped towards the last Demon that shouldered him out of the way with his jaws separated to bare his fangs, while his hands were curled rigid to threaten with his claws.

Orpheus shot his hand out and grabbed him by the snout to draw him closer. "You will be walked into here. They are not being hostile. They are not looking for a fight. Calm yourself, or I will have to abandon you to protect Reia."

"Orpheus," she warned, wishing he could see her lips thinned in disapproval.

He released his snout and looked down to her.

"If he transforms and attacks someone, there will be chaos. He is a Mavka, they already perceive us as a threat."

She noticed the odd lurking red eye here and there, and realised the Demons already looking at them warily. She swallowed a thick lump that formed in her throat.

“It’s okay.”

She reached out while holding the side of the cloak to hide her hands and patted the Mavka’s arm since he looked overwhelmed with all the noise and touches from others.

His head spun to her suddenly, before he looked down to her patting his arm. His tense shoulders loosened, and he let out a long breath. Then he looked around, his head darting quickly one way and then the other, before his eyes slowly faded back to their usual green.

“I am sorry,” he apologised. “This is much for me. I am unfamiliar with so many and worry of being harmed.”

She had to bite back her laugh.

“Don’t worry, I understand,” she said quietly. “I feel the same way. It’s a lot.”

“I am not alone in this feeling?” He touched his hand over his chest.

She shook her head, and his eyes flashed yellow for a moment.

“Thank you. I will try to focus on remaining calm so I do not bring harm to you.”

Orpheus walked them down a narrow street that was less cluttered to bring them to a particular shop. It was as if he knew the layout of the village by memory. A large bell chimed as they walked inside, both Duskwalkers needed to duck under the doorframe as not to knock their horns and antlers.

“Orpheus!” A gruff masculine voice exclaimed before a tall Demon with patches of brown skin within his black void flesh ran from behind a counter. “You have returned.”

Orpheus and Reia were the first to enter, and she saw the tall Demon’s red eyes widen when the other Duskwalker walked in behind them.

“And you have brought another Mavka?” His eyes turned to her. “And a smaller one?”

Reia clutched at Orpheus’ shirt. *A Demon is talking... talking like a human, like a proper shopkeeper.*

“Greetings, Snush,” he answered calmly, his arm tightening around Reia at the Demon’s observational gaze. “I have come to procure clothing for the Mavka.”

Snush, with little curling horns that sprouted from just above his temples and went sideways, let out a mousy laugh. He was wearing a perfectly tailored white suit shirt, black vest, pants, and dress boots. His black and white pinstriped jacket was even a coat tail.

“Well, he does look rather underdressed. Look at him! He’s only wearing pants.”

The Mavka’s eyes flashed a reddish-pink in embarrassment as he reached up to touch at his bare chest.

Snush rushed around the counter to go into the back of the shop. There were clothes hanging on racks, but even she could tell they were too small to fit onto the height of a seven-foot Duskwalker.

“You are lucky I always make clothing for something of your kind since you come back infrequently and are too impatient to wait for me to tailor you something.” He came out holding folded bundles of black clothes, a whole stack of them. “There is also the odd Demon that is almost as tall as you.”

Reia remained quiet and frozen at Orpheus’ side, only moving when he did to step out of the way so Snush could approach the Mavka freely.

He flinched and scuttled back a step when Snush raised a shirt to his body to check that it would fit. He nodded, not seeming to mind his apprehension.

“He is a little more gangly than you, but they should fit just fine for now.” He pointed to his pants. “Are they the only ones you have?” When he nodded, relaxing slowly, Snush shook his head. “Stolen from a human no doubt? It’s even

tied together by rope! Let me quickly stitch another button onto some pants so they don't fall and then you should be fine. Do you need a cloak?"

The Mavka looked to Orpheus for guidance. He nodded in return.

"Yes. Cloak is good."

Snush waved his hands down so that he would lower his head and inspected his antlers.

"I will have to alter one of those too since you won't be able to slip your antlers through the holes like his horns." He turned to Orpheus. "Give me a few minutes and I'll be done."

When he was gone, Reia reached inside her mask to cup her cheeks in disbelief.

"Oh my gosh," she gasped. "I can't believe this."

"I was very surprised when I first came here too," Orpheus said down to her, patting her back lightly as if he was trying to comfort or reassure her. "This place wasn't as advanced as it is now. It has grown over the centuries, but I have experienced what you both are feeling."

I highly doubt that. He was a Duskwalker; he wouldn't understand the maelstrom of emotions and shock after shock she was experiencing. There was no fear, there was no *need* to be afraid of this place.

It was lively and surprisingly welcoming. She wondered what it would have been like to walk around without her disguise. Would it have been different? Would she have felt a million threats rather than the mostly insignificant glances she was receiving?

Before she could say anything, Snush returned with the altered items inside a knapsack except for a singular pair of pants, a shirt, and the cloak.

"Here, I have packed two other shirts and pants inside, but you can put these on so that you don't look so out of place on the street." Before he laughed, "Although, three Mavka's walking around is already an odd sight."

“Turn around,” he growled down to Reia when the Mavka started untying the rope holding his pants up.

She did as she was told, turning in his cloak so she couldn’t see anything and waited for him to put the new pants on. She could hear Snush talking, telling him how to use the buttons before sighing and offering to show him how to do it.

Orpheus tapped her lightly to tell her she could turn back around, and she blinked at the Mavka who was fully dressed, cloak included.

Snush pointed to his feet.

“You will struggle to find shoes since your feet are hoofed, but there is a store a few shops down that have slippers with a hole in the end to account for them.” Then he clapped his hands together with a sharp-toothed grin. She’d almost forgotten he was a deadly predator with how nice he was until she saw the white flash of them. “Trade?”

Orpheus dug into the sack of crystals he had and pulled out a small handful and held his fist out.

Snush jumped while kicking his feet, running forward to collect them with his hands cupped forward together.

“You always bring these. Customers love it when I add them to clothing, and I can ask for higher trade.” He placed them in his pocket before bringing his gaze to her and stepping forward. “I have never seen a female Mavka. She is so small. I may have a dress or two that’ll fit her.”

Orpheus drew her deeper into his cloak to hide her, only allowing her a small amount of a gap to see through one eye.

“Do not approach her,” he barked loudly.

“I thought you preferred humans,” Snush chuckled, sounding less mousy and much deeper. “Gave up trying that useless endeavour and found one of your own kind then?”

Orpheus only growled in response.

“Testy, testy.” He shook his finger up and down at him, not seeming to be afraid as if he was used to his aggressive

behaviour. “If she is like you and prefers black, I have something for her.”

“Would you like?” he asked her, ending his growl to give her an excited, *‘hmm?’*

Her curiosity was too much, and the idea of wearing something made by a creature that would normally eat her sounded too enticing. Reia nodded while remaining silent.

Excitement thrummed when he pulled a short black dress from a rack that had a V of beads stitched around the waist. She expected something garbage and instead was presented with something that was quite lovely.

Orpheus took it, used both hands to lift it into the air, and then nodded. “It’ll fit her.”

Reia blushed. He knew it would fit because he knew her body well. *That’s so embarrassing!*

He handed him another crystal shard and they promptly left. He gave it to her so she could hold it for now until he obtained his own carry bag. It was light and her bag was fairly empty now that it had almost no food and just a half-filled water sack in it.

They went to the shoe shop Snush told them of, and Reia and the Mavka were able to acquire footwear suitable for them both. It was a large shop and she picked out two slippers, one black and the other navy blue, and a pair of brown leather boots. The storekeeper wasn’t as chatty and let them be as they searched.

Then Orpheus led them deeper into the markets once more. They received significantly less stares now that the Mavka was clothed. He looked neater and less like a savage.

A food stall vendor approached them holding out a tray of pastries with a large fang-filled grin. Reia pointed to them within her cloak, showing Orpheus she was hungry.

He placed his hand over hers and shook his head before making them walk away. *But I’m hungry!* He told her if she wanted anything he’d give it to her. She couldn’t believe he was denying her food, something she actually needed!

She pointed to a different food place that had sticks of meat dribbled with some kind of sauce. She couldn’t smell any of the meat, only the pastries and stew broths since the cloaking aroma was hiding them. Despite this, it smelled delicious.

Different spices and herbs could be smelt in the air. Some foods smelled sour, others sweet, and she craved all that gave a tangy impression.

He denied her again, before he leaned down and said very quietly, “It’s mostly human meat.”

Oh fuck. Heart thundering, Reia recoiled and knocked into the Mavka. She came out of his cloak. *I almost ate my own kind!* Like a freaking cannibal.

Orpheus darted closer and shielded her once more, darting his head around to make sure she hadn’t been seen.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered before he could give her some kind of warning.

He nodded to show he accepted her apology.

He eventually took her to a different food store and selected something off the menu. It was like a pocket of pastry, and she turned in his cloak when he took them to the side of the pedestrians on their path so she could lift her mask and eat it.

It tastes like mushroom... with beef and some kind of weird gravy. She looked inside and saw there were bits of carrot in it. *They even eat vegetables?* Everything was obviously filled with meat, not a single piece of food without it, but she hadn’t thought they would add to it.

When they left the cooked food part of the street markets, he took her to an ingredients area. Her eyes widened as her lips parted. She started pointing everywhere. A sack of flour. Another of oats. Wheat and yeast. There were small bags of spices, and she asked for every kind that was available. Then there were the herbs he didn’t have in the garden.

By the time they were through, Orpheus’ back was covered in sacks of food ingredients she could use to make

almost anything she knew how to cook except for the truly complicated things.

She'd had to teach herself to cook since none of the villagers would help her or feed her, and Reia could make anything. *I can't wait to eat a cookie.* Orpheus was going to learn how to make so many different foods, and she couldn't wait to show him. She grinned beneath her mask.

I wonder if I can get him to eat some.

They'd also both taken a sack of salt each.

He didn't look weighed down at all with everything, and he took them to another place where they could purchase jewellery or supplies to some make them themselves. She was less enthusiastic about this place, but he instructed the Mavka to make choices to craft with.

Then they were walking down a street that had house building supplies.

No one tried to openly talk to them, and Reia was dizzy with how quickly Orpheus was trying to rush them through so they could leave as quickly as possible. She wanted nothing more than to explore this strange place, but knew it wasn't possible.

The two Duskwalkers were heavily conversing on what the Mavka needed in order to begin constructing his own cabin when she saw a flash of white.

She looked out from his cloak to see it when it moved, the colour not as prominent here and it easily caught her attention. It was gone, and she became engrossed in their conversation to help them to make decisions so she could be useful.

"Black cats," someone said quietly right next to her ear.

Reia's breath hitched.

She turned, pulling Orpheus' cloak to the side to see who spoke to her. No one was there.

"Are you okay?" he asked because of her sudden motion, pulling the cloak over her more and gripping her side firmer.

It had always felt strange to have his large hand circle her entire side.

"Yes. I thought I heard someone."

He tilted his head at her before lifting it to look around them. He seemed unconcerned and continued them down the street.

"You will need lots of rope," Orpheus said to the Mavka. "And powdered clay so you can create a firm base. You will need much of it to fill holes where you stake your logs when you start building."

Reia smiled under her mask as she listened to Orpheus who was clearly explaining everything. *He's really good at being a teacher.* She'd felt the same way when he'd been showing her how to make trinkets.

"Black cats are lucky," a feminine voice said next to her ear when Orpheus was in the middle of trading for bundles of rope.

She gasped, the voice much louder than before.

She turned and stepped out of his cloak just in time to see a white feather fluttering to the ground behind her. A blur of white disappeared into the crowd, and Reia quickly stepped back when she almost ran into a Demon.

She gave a disgruntled grunt at Reia.

Her heart was racing by the time she was back within the shield of Orpheus, gaining a reddened glow of floating orbs.

"Stay with me," he warned. "You are small. It'll be easy to lose you, and you cannot imagine how I will react if I discover you are gone."

Oh, she definitely could, but she couldn't ignore that someone was talking to her, whispering so close to her ear.

Her eyes darted around to find the white blur that had obviously been the one creeping up behind her. For a long while, she saw nothing but bodies of different heights and shapes crowding around her as they walked.

There! She saw a torrent of white feathers that were worn over a person that looked completely and utterly like a dark-

skinned human being. It was worn like a cloak, covering her face and the pristine white dress she was wearing.

The moment Reia saw her, their eyes met for just a moment. She ducked behind a building while waving her hand towards herself beckoningly.

She grabbed Orpheus' shirt and started pulling him. *She wants me to follow.* And Reia wanted to know why. She also wanted to know why there was a *human* here.

Yanking him, she fell out of his cloak in her haste to follow the feather covered woman. He stumbled after her, trying to cover her with his cloak as she turned the corner.

Reia just saw her before she disappeared around a different corner, like she was only walking away.

"Reia, what are you doing?" He grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. "We cannot leave the Mavka behind."

"Please, we have to go this way."

She pointed down the laneway, and he covered her bare hand with his own.

"No. We must go back."

Shit, we're wasting time. What if the woman disappeared while she was explaining to him what she'd seen?

She had two options. Go back with Orpheus and hope she didn't lose this strange woman, or force him to follow her.

"Follow me, Reia," a whisper said into her ear. "I cannot remain here for long."

Her head spun to look behind her to find the space was empty.

She knows my name. What did her words mean?

She turned her head up to Orpheus. Something inside her was telling her she *had* to follow, that it was important, that this mattered.

"I'm sorry."

Reia ran, heading down the street before he could stop her.

"Reia!"

She ignored him as she held onto her mask to keep it down. Her new shoes patted against the hard dirt ground as she gave chase, searching everywhere through the eyeholes of her mask for a flicker of white.

Reia went down a street that was more like a laneway when she saw her duck into it. She was gone, and it was a dead end. She spun on the spot.

Where'd she go?!

Orpheus was with her not even a second later, and she ran into him when she turned. His eyes were a fierce red and a terrible growl was coming from him.

"You promised to stay with me!" He grabbed her arms and squeezed them in anger. "I would not have brought you here if I knew you would do this."

"A woman was speaking to me," she said, forgoing her quietness in her panic of losing her. She continued to search around the empty area. "She knew my name, Orpheus."

"And you thought following her was wise?" He leaned closer as the depth of his rumbling grew darker. "If she knows your name, then she knows what you are."

"It looked like a human."

She ignored him to look around, desperately trying to find her. Her eyes grew wide when she finally noticed the shop name at the end of the laneway. *Black Cat's Bookshop.*

"There!" She pointed to it as she grabbed his hand to start pulling him that way. "We need to go in there."

"Are you going to run from me again if I don't?"

"Yes," she answered flatly.

With a snarl, he started storming in that direction, forcing her to sprint between certain steps to keep up with his agitated strides. He shoved the door open, making it slam against the wall at the same time a bell rang above.

He started searching between aisles of books, looking for the woman she'd spoken of. He looked hostile, like the person might not be safe if he found them.

“There is no one here,” he said to her when he was done. “No one but the shopkeeper.”

Her heart sunk, and she turned her sight to the Demon who was staring at them wide-eyed with cat ears poking up from his head while whiskers twitched on his face. She noticed a long tail swaying from behind him as he retreated behind the counter to hide from Orpheus, who was obviously seething with rage.

“But—”

Her words were cut short when she saw a white feather on the ground near her feet. She bent over and picked it up, twirling it in her fingers when she brought it to her face.

Orpheus covered her fingers to hide them while allowing the feather to be free above their hands. He leaned in to sniff it.

“You saw the Witch Owl,” he said quietly, his eyes turning back to their normal blue. Once more, he looked around. “She must want you to find something in here.”

“A book?” she asked before eyeing what had to be hundreds of them all neatly put away on shelves.

“Most likely.” His head turned to the door. “For whatever reason, she has guided you here.” He looked torn as he stared in the direction of outside. “She has helped me many times, as you saw with the garden, but we must return to the Mavka. He cannot be by himself.”

“Can I stay here while you get him?” When he shook his head, she quickly added, “I won’t leave, and there is no one else here besides the shopkeeper.” She gestured to him. “I also have my sword.”

His eyes flashed white with worry, and she could see tension building in his body.

“Reia, I cannot leave you by yourself.”

“Please, Orpheus? I’ll stay hidden if anyone comes in, and the shopkeeper has already seen you and knows that I’m with you.”

She looked at him and saw he was still slightly cowering behind the counter. He was small, perhaps even shorter than Reia, and didn't look strong at all.

Orpheus nodded hesitantly and nuzzled the side of her mask.

"Yes, we shouldn't ignore the Witch Owl. Stay here, do not leave even if she calls you to go somewhere else. I'll be back shortly." Then he turned to the cat Demon to give him loud snarl and purposefully flared his eyes red. "Come near her, and I will kill you."

It took him a moment to leave, staring at her as if his feet were rooted to the ground. It appeared he was unwilling to part from her. Then he huffed heavily with his fists clenched before he sprinted out of the shop. She had no doubt he'd run the entire way if he needed to.

Reia turned to cat Demon. "Did you see someone covered in white feathers?"

"Yes," he answered shakily, pointing in a certain direction with a thin claw.

She realised she hadn't needed to ask him at all for assistance as more feathers had been dropped along the floor. She followed them while picking them up one-by-one as they led to three different shelves.

She didn't know which book to grab out of the many. They were obviously stolen from humans because some were of dancing techniques, others on how to build a house – she took that one for the Mavka, thinking that was what she was supposed to grab.

It was only when she was about to walk away that she noticed something sticking out from the top of a certain book. She grabbed it and found a white feather stuck between the pages.

A fighting technique book? She flicked through it, finding pages upon pages of different techniques and stances to learn how to fight with a sword. There were passages written, explaining how to do them correctly, while drawings

aided the reader to explain how they needed to stand visually.

This would be so helpful in learning how to use my sword! Her chest flushed with excitement before she ran towards the next shelf with a feather on the ground in front of it.

She ignored everything and searched only for the book with a feather in it.

Disappointment sailed through her.

A children's book? Why would she show me a children's book? It had many tales inside it, some she knew, most she didn't.

She opened it to the feather and laughed so loud she feared everyone in the Demon village heard it. It was placed at a particular tale. 'Beauty and the Beast'. *Very fucking funny, Witch Owl. More like Reia and the monster.* Except, she knew her beast wouldn't turn into a handsome man no matter what she did.

She snapped it shut and turned to follow the path of feathers once more. Freezing on the spot, she saw the bookkeeper staring at her at the end of the isle behind a shelf that was in the middle.

"You are a human," he said quietly, ducking behind the shelf more to only show one of his cat-like eyes.

She cringed behind her mask as her gut twisted in apprehension.

"N-no, I'm not. I'm Mavka."

He pointed a curled claw at her.

"Your hands." She winced when she looked down and saw they were bare and uncovered as she was clutching the three books she'd already taken. "And I can see flesh on your neck when you turn your head. Your laugh was also strange."

Reia reached up and pulled her hood more forward to hide it. Her dress came up to her neck, but as long as she kept her head forward and down, it hid her skin.

“So what?” she asked, reaching behind her to show she’d grabbed the hilt of her sword strapped to her back. “If you come near me, I’ll attack, and if he comes back and finds you eating me, he’ll kill you.”

He shrunk, lowering himself as he gripped the shelf tightly.

“I have never spoken to a human before, only ever eaten. I have always wanted to.”

“Why?” She kept her hand on her sword but loosened her grip.

He reached around the edge of the free-standing shelf he was hiding behind and hooked a claw on top of a book to tilt it back from its resting place.

“They write books, and I like them. I have traded for many of these and have only gone back to the surface in search of more. Your kind is so remarkable, able to create stories with nothing more than pen and paper and your wonderful minds.” His lips curled into a smile that revealed feline fangs. “How can I kill creatures that create something I enjoy so much? I always wonder if I had eaten a human who would have written my favourite book.”

Reia lowered her hand as her anxiety quickly faded.

“You like humans then?”

“Like?” he laughed, meowing at the end. “I love humans. Can I approach?”

“Fine. But keep your *mittens* to yourself.”

His eyes brightened, and he ran forward, making her scuttle back. He ignored her demand and gripped the wrist of her free hand to pet the back of it. Now that he was closer, he appeared even smaller. He only came to her chin.

“Have you ever written a book?” he asked, turning her hand over to touch her palm with a delicate touch.

“No. I’m not much of a reader either.”

He gave a tsk before looking up to her. “May I see your face? The books talk about so many expressions, and I have not seen many of them. I want to know what they are so I can picture them better.”

She couldn’t help smiling, finding him rather odd, but also no danger to her. Perhaps Reia had too much of a trusting personality. She lifted the mask to show him her face and he gave her a beaming grin in return.

“Look at your eyes! So green, just like in the stories.” He reached up like he wanted to touch them but didn’t, his fingers, and hazardous claws, twinkling in front of them. “They say same some look like emeralds, others like leaves. Yours are sparkly! Is this a smile on a human? What does it mean when your lips thin?”

She showed him, and his eyes grew bright.

“You look so angry and annoyed! Another, show me another expression!”

Reia laughed at him, and she thought he was nearly about to jump up and down with obvious glee.

“How about a pout?” she offered, exaggerating when she stuck her bottom lip forward.

His mouth opened wide as if with shock, before he attempted to mimic her. His feline fangs tried to catch on his bottom lip as he jutted it forward.

“I like this one. Can you cry? Demons do not cry tears and apparently much happens on a human’s face when this happens. Does your face go red and snotty like in the books?”

Reia opened her mouth to say that was a far too complex emotion to share without a source. However, the door opened to the shop, and she swiftly shoved her mask down. He retreated when her name was called, immediately looking cowardly and wary once more.

“Over here,” Reia called out, and Orpheus emerged into the aisle with the Mavka in tow. “See? All safe and sound.”

He came and placed his arms around her, rubbing the side of his head against her mask.

“Not again.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed before pulling away from him to go to the last shelf the feathers led to. It was a book

of monsters, both real and mythological.

It had detailed descriptions of Demons, Duskwalkers, and Ghosts – all of which were real. Then there were the mythical creatures such as Centaurs, half-human, half-horse creatures. Werewolves, humans that were cursed to shift into monstrous wolf like humanoids. Even Phantoms, a creature that lived on the cusp of life, neither alive nor dead. They could be ghostly or be of flesh, like a human.

Why did she want me to have this? Regardless, Reia took it.

She presented all four books to Orpheus.

“Can I have all these?”

“You can have whatever you like,” he answered, and she walked to the counter.

The joyful cat Demon from earlier looked skittish as the Duskwalkers towered from behind her.

“She wants these,” Orpheus told him, not knowing that she and this Demon had already spoken to each other.

He reached into his sack of crystals and offered them to him. The Demon took the hard-cover bound books, wrapping each one in brown paper and then putting them in a bag for her, all the while eyeing the feathers sticking out of her hand.

She gave half to him since it seemed like he wanted them.

“But I have already traded,” Orpheus said with a confused twist of his head.

“I don’t need all these, and he looked interested in them.”

He smiled as he took them, gripping them tightly with both hands in glee. He was rather expressive for a Demon.

Then they started to leave.

At the last moment, Reia turned her head over her shoulder and out of Orpheus’ cloak. She lifted her mask enough and closed a singular eye towards him.

“A wink!” he shouted just in time for her to hear it before the door shut. “Amazing!”

She bit her lips together tightly to stifle her giggle. *I liked him.*

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Reia walked with Orpheus while the Mavka walked on the other side of her as they stepped back onto one of the busier streets.

She yanked on Orpheus' shirt to get his attention.

"Why are they all staring?" she asked quietly, noticing heads turn to stare more than before.

"He caused a disturbance," he answered while nodding his snout at the Mavka.

She saw his eyes had changed to a reddish-pink.

"I was distressed when I could not find either of you. I thought something terrible had happened."

"He was running through the streets, pushing and knocking people over to find us. It caused alarm and many were worried. He also damaged a cart, and I had to trade crystal in compensation for repairs."

His shoulders slumped heavily under his cloak.

"I thought I had failed in protecting you, when you had helped to bring me here."

He knew the only reason Orpheus had brought him to Demon village was because of Reia, and he felt indebted to her. He was taking his duty *very* seriously.

"I'm sorry." She patted his arm through her cloak. "I shouldn't have run off like that. It's my fault."

“As long as you are safe, I do not mind that they are angry with me.” And, well, they did look rather pissed off with him, their eyes narrowed into glares.

“There are still a few things we need to get, but we should hurry,” Orpheus told them. “He needs an axe and a few other carving tools.”

They went back to where she’d run off from and bartered for the rest of the items.

After that, there wasn’t anything else they needed, so they headed towards the edge of the village to leave. Orpheus told them their stay had to be short, especially since the washing spell would fade soon, and she needed to be long gone before it did.

Only when they were passing the fabric stalls did they stop, upon her request.

She pointed to a roll of fabric that was pink, another that was black, a pale blue one, as well as one that was brown. Orpheus traded for multiple metres of each, as well as some proper sewing supplies. There were also jars of clothing dye. Reia smiled underneath her mask, happy that she could make her own clothing and had proper dyes to change the wedding dresses she had back at the cabin.

The last thing they took was something for her to eat, and she held onto it until they had left the village and crossed the clearing, which was now heavy with shadows as night fell. Only when it was safe for her to remove her deer-skull mask did she begin eating.

“How are you supposed to carry me, now?” she asked Orpheus around a mouthful of food. His back was covered in lots of large and heavy items. “I don’t really want to cling to the front of you.”

“Will you be alright on my side? It’ll be similar to my arm except you’ll be pressed against me.”

She took the last bite of a swirling pastry that tasted like chicken and leek. “I guess that’ll have to do.”

She walked closer and allowed him to curl his arm around her until she was secure, and then he lifted. She almost yelped when she felt his large hand grab her entire arse, his fingers splaying over both cheeks. Bending her legs around him, she held onto his shirt with both hands.

“Well,” she laughed, staring at the side of his bony face before looking forward when they picked up the pace, no longer hindered by her short strides. “I would say that went really well. I expected something to go wrong.”

“Something did go wrong,” Orpheus said with a dark tone. “You should not have left my side, or, at least, you should have told me that you were following the call of the Witch Owl.”

Reia shrugged.

“How was I supposed to know what she looked like when human? I just saw a woman wearing a cloak of white feathers. I didn’t know it was her.”

“What if you had been taken, Reia?”

“I knew you’d follow me.” She turned to the Mavka to steer away from Orpheus scolding her. “Did you get everything you needed, though?”

“I… don’t know.” He looked to Orpheus. “Did I get everything I needed?”

“This should be enough for you to begin. It will take time for you to build a house, and you will have to make this trip yourself multiple times.”

He brought a hand up to cup the side of his snout, tapping it with a claw. “My cave is in the cliff of the Veil. I cannot build it in the forest there. It’s the serpent Demon’s territory, and he is very violent. He will destroy whatever I make.”

Orpheus was silent for a little while as he thought.

“I recently killed the Arachnid of Sorrows. If her territory is still empty of a strong predator, you can build there. If not, kill them and take it for yourself. They will not have built their nest yet and will have minimal defences.”

The Mavka’s eyes brightened to yellow. “That territory borders yours.”

“I am aware.” Orpheus moved a low hanging branch to make sure it didn’t brush against her. He was always so careful of her wellbeing. “It means I can aid you. However,” he said in a dark tone while pointing at him, “that does not mean you can enter my territory freely. It is mine, and if you begin to linger in it, I will fight to keep you out.”

“Orpheus!” she exclaimed, smacking him lightly in the chest. “That isn’t very nice. He’s your friend.”

“Friend?” he asked, cocking his head to the side. “But you are my companion that lives with me.”

“So?” Her brows drew together. “You can have more than one friend. Even ones that live in their own houses and visit.”

“But I do not want him to visit, to be close to you,” Orpheus shamelessly stated.

“Mavka can be friends?”

“Sure,” she said as she turned away from Orpheus to look at him. “Humans have lots of friends. They generally only live with their families.”

“What’s a family?” They asked at almost the same time.

“Like a wife and husband and, you know, their children?” Then something registered within her. “Oh, I guess you Duskwalkers wouldn’t know.”

As far as she knew, Demons didn’t procreate. *I didn’t see a single child in the village.* Or maybe she did but just hadn’t noticed them.

“Orpheus, can Demons have children?”

“Yes, but it is uncommon. Only those in this area do so, and only those that have created some form of bond together. I believe it is becoming more prevalent now as they grow more human, like you saw.”

What about Duskwalkers, then? Orpheus said he’d never met a female one before, did they even exist? Could they possibly be an all-male species, created rather than born?

“Where did you guys come from, anyway?”

They turned to look at each other, twisting their heads in opposite directions as if mirroring each other’s movements.

“I have never discovered the answer to that question,” he said with a lingering uncertainty in his tone. “And it appears as though he doesn’t know either.”

“So, you both just… appeared one day?”

“I don’t think that is the case,” Orpheus answered with a sigh. “I just cannot remember where or what I was doing before I ate for the first time.” He touched his snout. “I remember eating a wolf and my skull formed, but I couldn’t see, could only feel what was on my face. Did you eat a fox first, and then a deer to gain your antlers?”

The Mavka nodded in answer.

“That was when I started remembering things. My antlers caught on everything. I got trapped in thorn vines for a long while before the Witch Owl freed me.”

“I did not form my horns until I ate an antelope,” Orpheus said. “I remember staring down at its hornless form and suddenly having my own. I wandered through the surface for a long time after that, hungry and eating everything in sight. I was not much more than a mindless animal.”

“I was the same,” the Mavka agreed. “I could not speak until I ate a…”

He paused and stared at Reia.

“Yeah, a human, I got it.” His eyes turned reddish-pink, and she snorted a giggle. “I’ve kind of gotten used to the whole humans being food thing for Demons and Duskwalkers. As long as you don’t eat me, I don’t care.”

“She is strange,” he said to Orpheus. “She does not mind that we have eaten her kind.”

He chuckled in return, turning to affectionately bump the side of his snout against her.

“Yes, I have come to discover that myself.”

That still doesn’t answer my question, though.

Did Duskwalkers procreate? Did they give birth to children? What if Reia was to have sex with him? Would they have a child?

No, she thought with certainty. *I'm a human, he's a Duskwalker. We can't reproduce. It's not possible.*

She wasn't sure how she felt about that, but a part of her was relieved by the thought.

The journey back had been similar to the one travelling to the Demon village. Little happened, much of it was boring, and there wasn't anything exciting to look at.

They spoke about the tools they'd obtained for the Mavka, and he pulled each one from his back so Orpheus could explain their uses and what he would need to do with them.

She listened in, thinking about the events that had played out, how she'd discovered what the village was like, how the few Demons they'd interacted with were actually... nice?

Then there were the many questions she'd had answered, and the new ones that had taken their place. Like the Demon King and his castle and why the Witch Owl had gone out of her way to make sure Reia got her books. What did they signify? Why were they so important that she had to have them?

Being curled up in his side was easier since it was thinner than the width of his back, and she was able to straighten her legs freely. She was exhausted, though, from not sleeping in a proper bed. She couldn't wait to get *home*, have a warm bath and look at everything Orpheus had gotten her.

He'd almost run out of crystals, but hadn't minded. She knew how big the original one was before he smashed it, and both her and the Mavka were lucky to have his generosity.

The part that brought her the most humour was when he tried to get her to pick out jewellery, as if he knew most women liked them. Most weren't particularly beautiful, but

they each had pretty, uncut stones with metal twine holding them together.

There were, however, a few she thought might have been stolen from humans.

She didn't want any of it. What was the point? They seemed like unnecessary things that would weigh her down. But with how much he was trying to convince her, she had a funny feeling the last human he took there had wanted much of it.

The amulet on her head was the most beautiful thing she could wear, and nothing could compare to it.

When they got closer to their home, she heard the familiar sounds of the more animalistic, bestial Demons – so different from those she'd just met. She would have told them to grow a brain, but she did truly wonder how many humans they would have needed to consume to start *growing* skin?

"Oh, go away," she groaned when she saw one climbing over the roof of the house before it crawled down onto the porch, telling her all the protections were gone. "I just want to go inside in peace."

"It's been a few days," Orpheus said as he placed her down so she could stand. She didn't need to be under his cloak since she didn't smell human, but he kept her with him anyway. "Cover your ears."

She gave him a dull look.

"Go ahead, do the thing."

She remembered from when she first arrived here. He looked at her like he was expecting her to change her mind, but she gestured for him to get it over with.

He walked up the stairs, opened the door that was already slightly ajar, and then roared furiously loud, making her eardrums throb with the booming depth of it. The two small Demons that had gotten inside scattered, hissing when they saw her, before shrinking away from Orpheus and the Mavka that was with them.

“I will help to carve the salt circle,” the Mavka said, placing his items down to lessen his load, then using his claws to dig into the ground.

“I’ll make the protection trinkets!” she offered, raising her hand and going inside, so happy and relieved she could use her damn legs again.

Orpheus removed the bulkier items, like the rolls of fabric, so he could fit through the doorway. Then he removed the rest inside. He placed them mostly in the kitchen area – up against the counter if it was large and on top if it was small.

He sniffed the air to triple check there were no Demons before letting out a snorting huff.

“Keep your sword on until all the protections are up.”

“It’ll be done in no time with all three of us,” she said, waving her hand up and down dismissively while he grabbed everything from the top cabinet she couldn’t reach.

Then he procured the dill from the garden, informing her it was still intact because they hadn’t been in a frenzy from her scent like before.

She smiled at the familiar environment once she was by herself, before lighting all the candles she could reach, feeling comfortable in the cosy and warm *cabin in the woods* aesthetic. She had been restless, wanting to return here during the entire way back.

I guess I really am starting to see this place as my home.

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Reia curled up on the armchair covered in furs in front of the fireplace as it crackled with life.

Once all the protections were in place, the Mavka left to return to his own home, then she and Orpheus went through everything they'd obtained. Most of it that wasn't cooking related went into her room. She was eager to start making her own clothing.

She had eaten a simple meal, had her first warm, relaxing bath in over a week – too exhausted to want anything naughty – and was now resting in her chair.

Night had not long fallen, and she had started going through the three books she'd gotten. Orpheus had left to go to the stream, getting her water since what had been left behind was now stale.

She'd given the Mavka the book on how to build different styles of houses that also had some explanations for building furniture as well. He'd given her his embarrassed glowing eyes while explaining to her he couldn't read. She just pointed to the diagram pictures and told him that he just needed to follow them to the best of his abilities. Orpheus then told him when he started building, he would also show him what he knew.

She went through the book about the different creatures, nothing really grabbing her attention. She also came to the realisation that she knew more about Duskwalkers and Demons than what was detailed inside of it by living in the Veil for nearly a month and half and having someone who could answer all her questions.

Ghosts were a known thing, frightening creatures that haunted places that had been decimated by Demons. They were lost souls that had died in such a horrifying way, filled with so much longing to live that they never left. She'd heard of them but had never seen one. Not even in the Veil.

She wasn't particularly interested in the mythical creatures. *Who cares about elves when they aren't real?* Why did she need to know all these made-up facts as if the author had been trying to fabricate their myth to be truth?

Reia flicked through the fighting book with excitement as she wanted to start practising some of the swings and techniques, but it was only something she could do when she was training.

Eventually, she moved onto the final book, flipping through the different children's tales. There were twelve of them in the thick and weighty book, and it was tiring to hold up. She laid it on her lap as she skimmed over the pages, only pausing when Orpheus entered the house.

"You're still awake?" he asked, placing the bucket on the furthest corner of the kitchen counter so it was out of the way.

"I'm tired, but not that tired," she laughed, gesturing to window next to her that ran over the porch. "The sun only went down not too long ago."

He came to stand in front of her near the fire. He stood there quiet for a moment, staring down for longer than was normal, before hesitantly asking, "May I sit with you?"

"Of course," she said with a note of confusion, unsure why he was even asking at all.

Orpheus promptly sat on the ground next to her and plonked his head on her lap when she'd been expecting him to sit on his own chair! He'd pushed her book to the side with his snout, making it fall between the armrest and her thigh to make room for himself.

He gave a loud snorting huff of contentment.

"I haven't been alone with you in quite some time, even before we left."

Her hands had flung into the air near her chest in surprise, but they fell now to sit around his head.

"Well, you did go out hunting for me before we did."

"And then you did not speak to me, even though I brought you meat and got stung by bees for you."

Reia pursed her lips and squinted her eyes at him. She wanted to tell him that he'd deserved it, but she'd ignored him because he'd implied that he wouldn't believe her promise to stay inside if he left – except she hadn't waited for him to tell her why.

We were gone for a long time. She couldn't imagine what she would have tried to do by herself had she been left alone for eight days. *I would have been bored brainless.*

Instead, she'd gone on an amazing adventure, and knew she was only the second human who had ever done it.

"Why are you wet?" she asked when she felt a slight amount of dampness soaking into her dress.

"Washed in the stream while I was there." He pushed the tip of his snout against the book in the gap between her and the chair. "Is that one of the books the Witch Owl guided you to take?"

Reia nodded before pulling it up to hold it. "I don't know why, though. It's just full of children's stories."

"Are they truthful tales?"

"No, just made-up ones."

"Would you be interested in reading one?" He lifted his hand to place a claw around the book's spine edge to lean it

towards him. “I can read, but I am slow, so I don’t read for enjoyment like you humans do.”

“Are you really asking me to read to you?”

The audacity! Reia didn’t even read for herself.

“Why not? It would please me if you did.” He lifted his head so he could reach up and cup the side of her face while facing her. “Your voice is lovely. I would like to hear it.”

A compliment like that made it hard to deny him.

She started going through them, trying to decide which one she should start with. The feather that the Witch Owl had placed inside it was still present, like a bookmark, and Reia paused when she got to the marked tale.

I might as well, I guess. She started with Beauty and the Beast, feeling remarkably silly for reading it to him.

Reia was only a quarter way through it when she lifted the book away to check on Orpheus to find his glowing orbs had turned black. Waving her hand in front of his face, she understood he’d fallen asleep.

She continued to read it out loud, allowing him to stay how he was.

It was a relatively short folklore tale, and she was done within a few hours, placing the book down to think.

Belle and the Beast, huh? She placed her hand over the top of Orpheus’ long snout, between his eyes and nose, and gently stroked the hard bone. She dwelled on this, wondering if perhaps that was why the Witch Owl had told her to take this book, had left a feather at this particular story.

Could I stay with Orpheus? She still didn’t know the answer to that question, but she was feeling less and less inclined to leave. The will for it dying with her growing fondness of his home and of him.

She continued to stroke his face, peering down at him as he gave a deep huff, like he could tell she was petting him. *I still don’t know, but what would have happened in the story if Belle had fucked the Beast before he became a human?*

There would be no magical transformation for Orpheus, and she knew that. She tried to imagine what he would look like as a human, but she couldn’t see him any other way than what he was.

A Duskwalker, with an animal skull for a face, who expressed himself through his ethereal glowing eyes and his actions. Someone who was unbelievably sweet, who was trying his hardest to make her like him even though he was sometimes a little stupid and aggressive.

How many times has he tried to eat me? But she was still here, and she no longer was worried he would.

What if Belle... She stopped that train of thought to really ask herself what she was trying to. *What if I had sex with Orpheus?* She wanted to. She dreamt of it, thought of it when he touched her, ached for it.

The only thing holding her back was that she feared there was no return from it. But wouldn’t there be? *I could still leave if I wanted to. It’s not like I’d be giving him my soul. And-and I’m not in love with him or anything.*

She’d almost begged him to in the forest. Having him face her while he delved his fingers, watching her, holding her, had been more intimate than any other time and she knew that was what she’d see if they did. And she’d *liked* it. His purple orbs filled with obvious desire staring into her was dragging her further and further under some kind of spell. Enchanted and not wanting to be woken from her hypnosis.

Reia hadn’t realised she dozed off until she felt Orpheus’ head moving around erratically on her lap.

She opened her eyes to find his were still black, but he was now clutching her legs, one of his hands underneath her skirt with his claws digging into her inner thigh.

She knew exactly why she could hear sniffing sounds and shot her hand down to cover her pubic mound right before he tried to bury his snout against it! Thinking about sex had made her dream it, and now she was turned on.

As always, when she now dreamt anything sexual, it was in that floating darkness with Orpheus floating around her and touching her.

His head reared back sharply when he punched himself with the back of her hand, his eyes flashing open to blue.

“Sorry,” he said, grabbing his snout with his hand like he’d lightly hurt himself – to find he’d lifted her skirt with it. He threw his hand out from underneath it as his eyes turned a reddish-pink. “I fell asleep? I was too comfortable.”

“I guess you were tired,” she said, trying her hardest not to laugh at the predicament he’d found himself in because of his sleeping state. “It’s okay, I fell asleep too.”

The fireplace now only had embers, and the candles around them were low in wax, telling her they’d both been out for quite some time. Outside was pitch black.

He turned his head to look that way, figuring what she had as well.

Her eyes ran over the long twirling spikes of his horns.

“You know, I never gave you your gift before we left.”

His orbs flashed bright yellow. “May I have it now then?”

“Here, let me up. I’ll go get it.”

He released her completely as he’d still been crowding around her lap. She went to her room, collected what she needed, and then came back to find him standing. Pointing to his own chair, she got him to sit and made him hold out his hand.

She placed her gift inside the palm of it.

He examined it with his other hand while pulling on one of the items to lift it into the air. On a thick length of twine were beads that had been threaded with a black bead, then a sky blue one, and then a purple one, repeated three times until it reached a jingle bell.

At first, she’d planned to make him a bracelet or something he could place in his room, but then this idea came to her.

“I thought maybe you could tie them to the centre of your horns.” She worried the inside of her bottom lip. “But if it’s too noisy, you don’t have to.”

“Could you put them on?” he asked, gesturing for her to take them. “I cannot reach that far properly.”

She took them, and just as she went to walk around him, he grabbed the back of her legs and pulled her onto his lap. She released a small squeak of surprise since she’d never sat on him before.

Her thighs were spread over his with her knees tucking into the space between his legs and the chair. He turned his head to the side to show her his intention. She carefully attached it to his horn, halfway between the base of his skull and where the first spiral began.

It rang quietly when he turned his head the other way so she could attach the second one.

“So, what do you think?”

She sat back onto his thighs while placing her hands on her lap and awaited his response with uncertainty.

“They are distracting.” He shook his head, making the bells ring. “But they will make me think of you when they jingle.”

He shook his head some more, even nodded up and down just to make them ring. Reia’s chest flooded with a heavy emotion she couldn’t distinguish. His words had gouged at her heart – like he was trying to reach into it and take it for himself.

She grabbed his snout with both hands and kissed the very tip of it with her eyes clenched shut tightly.

How can a Duskwalker be this charming?

When she started to pull back while opening her eyes, her eyelids fluttered to see his orbs had turned bright pink. It was odd to see them this colour, how blazing it was. This was only her second time seeing them like this.

“Your eyes are—” Before she could finish, Orpheus placed his hand around the back of her head and drew her closer to

swipe his tongue over her lips to return her kiss.

Long and flat, her toes curled when he did it again and the overwhelming need to greet it washed over her. Reia licked him back, almost moaning at the feeling of it brushing over her tongue and the light taste of him that greeted her.

He did it repeatedly, his eyes remaining that bright flamingo pink and stealing all her attention except for returning each lick. Her hands clasped the front of his shirt in tight little fists.

Desire flipped in her belly and sent a quiver through the inner walls of her pussy. Wetness grew at her entrance when he tilted his head to lick harder and the bells rattled slightly, and he bobbed his head just to make them do it louder.

Fuck. His large hands circled her between her waist and hips to almost wrap her middle completely in them. It caused her body to send a wave of goosebumps over her skin at the heat of them. *I want him.* She parted her lips to see if he would dip his tongue between them and he did, licking the entire hollow of her mouth. *I want him so much.*

Purple flashed in his orbs, showing her she wasn't alone in this, before going back to pink like whatever emotion it represented was stronger at that moment.

Reia pulled back and covered her mouth to hide just how deeply she was panting. It was pointless. She no doubt knew he could smell her arousal on her.

"Orpheus," she huffed, her body thrumming. "I want you to touch me freely."

Reia didn't know how to instigate this. She'd never had sex before and didn't know how she was supposed to bring them there naturally.

"Of course," he rasped, his eyes finally turning purple to remain there. He leaned forward to lick across her neck while he tried to pull her skirt up with her knees leaning on it. "I've always wanted to touch you outside of the bath."

"N-not here. Can we go to your bed?"

“*Yes,*” he quietly groaned, grabbing her arse to keep her to him as he stood. Each footfall caused the balls in the bells to rattle quietly. He drew his tongue underneath her jaw. “I like my gift very much, my little doe.”

Knowing he wouldn’t let her fall, she started undoing the buttons of his shirt hastily, her body growing more excited by the second in anticipation.

He plopped her onto the bed, then stood back to look down at the halfway undone shirt. He touched her work so far, the dim two candles on one of the side tables next the massive bed illuminating him enough for her to see.

“You are going to touch me too?”

Touch him? She was planning on her entire body touching him everywhere all at once. She nodded as she brought her legs onto the bed to kneel so she could pull her dress up and over her body. Then she slipped her tied underwear off.

She’d long ago lost her ability to be shy about her nudity in front of him, and she didn’t want to wait any longer than necessary in him asking her to strip or if he could remove it himself.

Naked, she reached up to undo the last of the three buttons. Just as he was pushing it off, she placed her hands on his waist to undo the button of his trousers, needing to, *having* to know what the rest of him looked like. She’d never seen his legs, and although she’d touched it, she’d never gotten see what his cock looked like.

She was about to tug them down and finally reveal what she longed to see, but one of his hands came down to clasp hers.

“Off,” she demanded. He was hesitant, and she didn’t care. “I want to see you.”

“You are acting strangely,” he said, before allowing her to pull them down.

He kicked his shoes off.

“I want you, Orpheus. I want to see, I want to touch, I want to feel.”

She only got a moment glance at his legs and feet before her words earned her a sharp growl, and he swiftly leaned down to knock her back. He pinned her arms against the bed and towered over her on all fours.

What she had seen were feet that looked similar to her own, but the toes were more paw-like, tipped with little claws. Bones had protruded over the base knuckles of them like his hands.

His legs had been thick, human-shaped, and covered mostly in short fur with fish fins daggling from the backs of his calves. It was only when his thighs were starting to reach his groin did longer fur sprout.

She'd seen the valley of fur where his seam must be, but his cock hadn't been extended for her to see.

"Watch your words, Reia," he warned, leaning down to lick at her collar bones, the flat part of her chest, and then drag his tongue over one of her breasts, moving it to the side at the hard lick like they were soft and malleable. "You might give me the wrong idea. You said I can touch freely, and I want to taste you."

He gave her breast a few licks, his tongue abrading her nipple and sending jolts through her. She moaned, pushing her chest up towards him before he moved to the other, keeping her arms pinned so she couldn't do anything with them when she wanted to grasp his head to cuddle into it.

Only when he got his knees between hers, not needing to force her as she opened them willingly, did he release her arms to lean back.

He grabbed her ankle and turned his head so he could drag his tongue over the top of her toes, the arch of her foot, and then over her calf, leaving a wet trail behind that his breath huffed over.

"I want to lick every inch of your body." He brought it over her knee, licking the inside and making her gasp at the tickling, yet pleasant, sensation. "I have wanted to know

how you react when it’s my tongue and not my hands brushing over you.”

His words were like fire that caused heat to grow beneath her flesh, flushing it and making it more sensitive.

“Ohhh,” she moaned quietly, her leg twitching, when he slipped that firm and wet organ over the sensitive bundles of nerves that ran down her inner thigh. The inner walls of her core clenched and spasmed erratically, making her abdomen quiver in reaction.

“But I have been waiting to taste you here again since that night.”

She knew he must have already been gazing at her folds when he’d held her leg up and spread her. When his tongue finished its path, he didn’t even pause. Instead, he licked over one side of her lips to delve his tongue straight into her folds, curling his tongue around her clit.

A cry broke from her throat, and she dug her hands into the furs of the bed when her hips lifted off the mattress. That first touch had been like adding fuel to a wildfire that was already too out of control.

And every deliberate, flat lick that followed had her skin flushed all the way from her cheeks to her chest. The liquid of her arousal pooled more at her entrance while her chest shook up and down at the torrent of sparks of pleasure his tongue gave her.

He hummed a noise of satisfaction when he finally dipped down to take it for himself. That alone had been enough praise to tell her he didn’t need words, especially when he speared her a moment later for more.

Her lips parted, her eyes flashed open, while her head tilted back at the swift penetration. Her adjustment was followed with her vision dazing as she laxed, moaning on each back-and-forth sweep.

Why does that feel so good?

His tongue was flexible, swirling, twisting, before folding when it reached her cervix. It was long enough that he was

able to caress her throbbing clit at the same time, rubbing it up and down as he slipped in and out.

She arched into each stroke, her legs twitching. *I'm going to come.* Just by this, by him using his tongue on her.

Her eyes bowed, wanting to, wanting to clamp that flexible limb and fall into bliss. But she always got a little too relaxed and satisfied after she came.

"Orpheus," she panted, reaching down to grab his horns and yank on him.

He answered with a growl while his claws dug into the bed. He shook his head, trying to get her to release him so he could continue. He didn't want to release his treat.

"C-come here," she begged, trying her hardest not to come, to not clench him so she couldn't.

It was nearly an impossible battle.

"You wanted me to touch you," he said, his tone dark and deeper than normal that it made her shiver. "You said I could taste you, and I want to make you come around my tongue, to taste your nectar."

His speed increased, spearing her faster, swirling, twirling. Her vision split into two. *Oh fuck. I'm going to come. I'm going to come. I'm going to...*

A flush of heat rose everywhere beneath her flesh, telling her twitching body she was about to fall over the edge.

"I want your cock, Orpheus!" she screamed, her body squirming.

He froze right before she came, and her heart nearly burst out of her chest. Her needy core was thrumming around his tongue, sending signals to the rest of her that it ached for the orgasm that was right there. One more lick, one more movement, and she thought she might have.

"My cock?" He withdrew from her, raising to his knees to show her had partially extruded, that the spiral of his tentacles were showing, shaking and shuddering to keep the rest of him down. The tips of them where they were thinner

were black, while the thick base of them were the same dark purple of his tongue. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Y-yes.” Her pussy pulsated for it, begged for it.

She didn’t feel like herself, like something had taken over her. Her body was trembling all over with uncontrollable spasms that wouldn’t relent. She was wet and she thought she might burst out of her skin if she didn’t get what she wanted.

And she wanted this Duskwalker more than anything right now.

She watched him willingly release his tentacles, untwisting and splaying them so that his cock could push through to its full length. Her eyes bowed in want at the sight of it.

It’s purple. And she could see every detail of it.

The two nearly fist-sized bulges at the base, the girth of it as it jutted up from between his hips. That deep indent that ran from the bottom all the way to the top until it reached the mushroom head. It dipped in slightly, following that line to the slit at the top where she could see a pearl of white liquid had already formed. Those tiny, soft frills that ran around the rim of his cockhead that also went down three sides of him.

The tentacles were wiggling in the air like they were seeking something, and she knew they just wanted something to hold.

He was awaiting her reaction at revealing himself to her, to see if she’d back away from her decision. She panted at it, every cell, every fibre, every nerve ending in her body weeping for it.

“Please,” she whispered.

A growl vibrated from his throat, and he grabbed her thigh to yank her across the bed. Before she could even finish her gasp of surprise, Reia was moaning when he shoved two fingers inside her.

“I will try to be gentle,” he told her, his voice growly from his excitement. “But I have been waiting a long time for you to give me this.” He leaned down on one elbow so he could sweep his tongue over her breast, making sure he caught her nipple, before moving up to her neck to be closer to her ear. He thrusted his fingers twice before he added a third, her body adjusting easily to them. “And I have already been preparing you.”

The corners of her eyes tipped more, her core clamping around his fingers that still desperately wanted to orgasm. *I know.* Orpheus would make her come by using two fingers and would only slip in a third when she came to stretch her.

She knew he’d been preparing her.

“Inside me,” she begged, undulating her hips in attempt to get him to remove his fingers while staring at his cock. She couldn’t *stop* staring at it. “I want you inside.”

He shuddered violently, and she watched it swell for a second as he pulsated, his tentacles writhing faster. He spread his fingers, and she gasped. He’d never done that before. She felt the slight burn, but it made her feel remarkably empty, even more so when he slowly slipped them out.

“I have been wanting to fill your precious cunt with my cock from the first moment you smiled at me.”

He grabbed around the base of his cock and started lowering his hips to position it.

Reia stared down, unwilling to look away, and spread her legs to allow him to fit his larger body into the space of her thighs. When he tucked the tip against the entrance to her pussy, Reia lifted herself a little so she could watch him push it inside her.

“And tonight, I’m going to claim it,” he rasped with that growl present.

He started pushing it inside.

Her hands darted up to grip his sides, her lips parting on a moan as she tried her hardest to steady herself. Her body

was pushed up at the force, her pussy stretching for the sheer size of just the head trying to enter.

Her body shook as she tried to adjust, Orpheus being cautious and slow. He'd said he'd done this before, that he'd fit inside a human, but she found it difficult. The lubricant on his cock aided them, but she felt *pain*.

S-shit. It hurts. He hadn't even pushed the head inside her yet and it was hurting!

They were both straining against the force of it.

"W-wait," she begged when he started shoving in harder, trying to push past her pubic bone.

It doesn't fit. Maybe she wasn't supposed to do this.

She yelped when the wider flare of his head popped inside, and he suddenly slipped in a few inches. He hissed in a breath at the same time she clenched her eyes shut.

"*Tight,*" he bit, pausing for the both of them. "You're so tight."

She felt him swell like he pulsated, causing her to gasp in pain, before his cock went back down to his normal girth. Her brows twinged, and he cupped the side of her head, forcing her face towards him despite her eyes remaining clamped shut. He licked the side of her face comfortingly to remove a tear.

"Are you okay, Reia?"

"Y-yes. You're just so big."

She was determined for this. It was in. It *could* fit.

She could feel her inner walls clamping around what was already inside her as if it wanted to suck it in itself. She felt overwhelming pressure, but the laxer her body became, the more she could feel it pressing into somewhere wonderful.

And it was *hot,* relaxing her tense muscles.

"P-please don't stop."

He drew back a little to spread his lubricant before he pushed in further. It was easier with the wide flare of his head already inside. Then another gentle thrust, and he was able to reach the end of her swiftly.

It’s all the way in, she sighed, feeling him press deep.

Reia felt full. Full of Orpheus, her pussy stretched for him, open for him, and it felt so remarkably good, and *right*. It felt comforting to feel his heartbeat thumping inside her as his pressure eased the terrible ache she’d been feeling.

She didn’t even mind the small sting she could feel.

Slipping her arms around him, she drew him closer so she could bask in the shape of his body, the mahogany and pine scent, in his heat. *He’s inside me.*

“Can I move now?” His voice sounded so strained, and she realised he’d been patiently waiting for her to adjust even though she could hear that he needed to move. His breaths were so shallow, huffing and panting, and it was like music to ears.

She buried her head in the fur on his chest and nodded, bending her knees so she could cup the sides of his hips. He started to slowly pull back, and she could feel the little frills on the sides of his cock tickle her entrance and tease her inner walls with their soothing texture.

Her breath hitched at the loss of the pressure until she felt the pulling sensation of his head on her entrance. She twinged, but it was short lived as he thrust back in.

“Oh!” He pressed everywhere, stroking her inner walls so completely that he didn’t miss a single place she needed him to.

It was lovely, delightful. She was shortly panting at his slow rhythm while tilting her hips back and forth to aid him.

“M-more,” she pleaded, clinging to him.

He was going too slow, was pressing too lightly. She wanted him to come in harder.

The bells she’d put on him were barely making a sound, and she wanted them to ring like crazy. His body was arching over hers. Leaning on his elbows, he was keeping almost all his weight off her. The only reason their torsos were touching was because she was lifting up to hold him.

“I cannot,” he groaned before shaking his head. “You feel so good already, but I must be gentle. I don’t want to hurt you.” His body was visibly quaking from the strain as though he wanted to, but couldn’t. “I cannot be rough with you until you accept me.”

Accept him? Reia was already accepting him! She’d begged for his cock, and it was currently inside her, stroking her walls with mind-numbing strokes. What else could she do?

But something was missing. She squirmed, feeling her legs being able to move freely.

Where are his tentacles? She lowered herself and looked down through the gap of their bodies. She let out a cry. She was barely taking half of him! She could see them writhing, desperately reaching for her legs as his cock moved in and out of her, but nowhere near enough. They couldn’t reach her, and she wanted to feel them wrap around her.

“Deeper.” She knew she was taking everything she could, but she wanted *all* of him. Every inch that was supposed to go inside. “You said you’d fit.”

“I can.” He huffed and pressed a little harder, but it did nothing to make him slip in further.

“Deeper,” she begged, feeling her pussy clenching for it. “I want to feel all of your cock.”

He stopped his rocking motion to turn his head down to her, and she panted as she looked up. He licked at his snout almost devilishly, his cock swelling for a moment.

“All of it, Reia?” he asked with that deep rumbling. “You really want all of my cock inside you?”

There was a heavy weight to his words. She didn’t care. She squirmed, shifting her hips side-to-side, before she grabbed his snout. She dragged it closer and pressed her lips to the tip to kiss it.

“I fucking want all of it,” she demanded. “Now.”

Reia didn’t do anything half-heartedly, and she hadn’t started sex with him only to barely take half his giant cock

in her. If he could fit, then she fucking needed every single inch of it.

She gasped when he shoved his claws into her stomach right around his cock. They cut through her skin, gouging in as he snarled.

“You’re perfect, my little human.”

His eyes flashed red at her blood, but they were back to purple within a second.

There was a vibrating sensation, something warm that was trinkling inside her.

Then he started to *push* in hard and her legs straightened as they shook. She knew he was using some kind of protective or manipulation magic on her body with his claws, and she felt no pain as he *forced* her to take him.

Her back arched as she gripped the furs. It was uncomfortable as she felt her insides move to make way as he dug deeper and deeper. Her thighs twitched when she could feel his tentacles tickling the sensitive inner flesh of her thighs with their tips before they started to slither over her.

“W-wait,” she stuttered.

She felt weird. It felt good, too good, being filled this far, this deep, but it was also strange.

“You begged for more, and I’m giving it to you.” But he did bury his snout into her neck. “It’ll be over in a moment, and then I can give you whatever you want. Harder, softer, deeper, lighter, faster, slower. Whatever you call for, I will make sure you have it.”

Something seemed to snap within her brain when he was three quarters in. Reia melted, her tongue poking out as she desperately panted like an animal in heat. Her vision dazed completely, and she attempted to wrap her legs around his hips so she could pull him in.

There was a certain pressure that made her mind fog.

“More,” she pleaded, and he continued to give it her. Then she felt the flared base of his cock where those bulges were

when they started pressing against her entrance, and he stopped. “Oh fuck, *yes.*”

She tilted her hips up and down, moving him inside her pussy herself, and a full body shiver wracked her. She could feel he was past her navel, could feel pressure behind it and further up as she moved. He removed his claws from her to place his hand against the bed.

“Your cunt is mine now.” He pulled back, and she felt the long stroke of it all the way to the flared head, then he surged forward quickly until he was buried all the way. “Nothing else but me will fit inside you, my little doe.”

The girth of his engorged cock, the length of it, the texture of those frills tickling her insides and entrance, and the pure heat of it – Reia didn’t want anything else.

His tentacles clamped around her legs and hips tightly, and he leaned back to tower over her on a straightened arm. He pressed his other hand against her chest, his fingers splayed so that both her breasts could be between them from underneath.

He used his hips and the tentacles to lift hers up higher and off the bed, curling her back as he held her down and in place.

Staring up at his wolfish skull, his glowing eyes a deep purple, while his fur was ruffled, all Reia felt was desire and lust. And the room was dim, placing him in near darkness just the way she preferred him.

She was lost the moment he started thrusting over her body. All the slowness from before was accompanied by a harder pump. His tentacles tried to make her follow his hips, but his hand holding her down forced them to stretch so he could pull back. And he came in deep, digging into her body and kissing her cervix tightly with the tip of his strange cock.

His body shuddered, his fur and fins lifting, as he tilted his head back. He was on his knees, and any of the gentleness she always received from him was gone.

The strokes to her walls were intense, narrowing when he pulled back, then spreading when he pushed in. The head dug into the swelling ridge of her G-spot, always gouging into it and tickling it with his frills.

His thrusts were measured, but she let out a loud scream when she started coming. Her body hopelessly clenched and spasmed in the sheer rapture of this, of him. She grabbed the wrist of his hand holding her down and the furs of the bed with her other hand, trying to steady herself as she broke apart under the power of her own orgasm that had been impatiently waiting since he'd used his tongue on her.

He didn't slow, didn't savour her as she came around his cock for the first time. He turned his head down and snarled with his jaws parting, his hips pistoning faster to draw it out.

"Good, Reia. Is this what you wanted? For me to fuck you until you wet my cock with your orgasm?"

"Yes!" she cried, her legs kicking out as she continued to milk him with blunt nails clawing.

Why is he so damn naughty like this?!

He was usually so soft and gentle, almost shy with her the rest of the time. But when he was free with his desire, he spoke filthy words to her, changing into a creature that ramped up her need like a spiralling cyclone. It was driving her insane.

He'd told her he'd claimed her pussy, that it was his, and right now she knew it was. He was the one taking it, filling it, stretching it, ruining it, and she *adored* it.

"Well, I wanted to taste it," he bit, yanking his hips back until the tentacles were forced to release her when she stopped squeezing him.

He withdrew and wrapped his hand around her thigh to lift her backside into the air so he could drag his tongue all the way along the slit of her pussy. A messy lick from her entrance all the way to her clit. He lapped up the remnants

of her orgasm, slipping his tongue inside to make sure he took every drop he could.

It didn't feel as fulfilling like before.

Then he lowered her back onto his cock.

"That's better," he said, smacking his tongue inside his mouth. "Your taste is delicious."

He slipped his knees back to lie over her, wrapping an arm underneath her body to clasp her backside when he was deep once more, and his tentacles returned to cling.

Reia could do nothing but take him as he started to move once more. She knew he was only pulling back halfway, but he came in faster than before – he came in hard. Her head lolled under the onslaught.

He was everywhere. His large body sheltered hers, hiding the light and only giving her him. She could feel nothing but the temperature of his body, his shaft moving, his fur rubbing over her and abrading her nipples and flesh. All she could smell was him. All she could hear were his unhidden grunts, his groans, his huffs, and those bells jingling so rapidly that they gave them a fast-paced song.

Sweat dripped from her and washed her body. Her limbs trembled as she dug her nails into his back, gripping his fur in hard tugs. She didn't know if she was hurting him, but even if he told her to stop, she couldn't.

Reia came again, and her eyes rolled into the back of her skull, unable to make a sound as her lungs seized. *Too much. It's too much.*

"Don't stop, don't stop," she whispered repeatedly. "It feels so good."

Floating in rapture, being pounded into wildly, Reia was lost, broken, shattered into a million tiny pieces. She wondered if she'd ever be able to be put back together again.

He let out a haunting groan, kneading her backside as she milked him.

She didn’t need more, this was already mind breaking, but she couldn’t stop whispering, “fuck me, fuck me.”

Reia tore into his back, bucking beneath him. It was fire, it was passion, it burned so good that she was disintegrating. He was stirring her insides. His thrusts increased in speed, giving it to her and tears started to drip.

His breaths were so short and panted she thought he might cease breathing at any moment, tearing through his throat like he was choking.

“Can I come inside you?” His cock did that pulsing swell, making him feel even thicker for a second. “I want to so badly. To fill you with my seed. My scent in you, on you, marking you.”

She wrapped her legs tighter around him so he couldn’t escape.

“Give.” Thrust. “It.” A hard slam. “To.” Another quick thrust. “Me!”

She needed to feel that hot semen bursting inside her, knew from when she’d touched him how hard it came out of him, knew that he would spill more than she could handle.

He engorged and his tentacles clasped her almost painfully, making sure neither of them could pull away. He shoved in hard, deeper, pressing into her body with all his might, and then froze.

He shuddered and twitched, quaking around her. He curled into her before he threw his head back and let out a deafening roar to the headboard.

Reia moaned at the first spurt, then squirmed for each one that followed. Liquid fire spread. It filled every crevice, every textured ripple, every place inside her to slowly fill up her channel.

His hips rocked, just barely pushing in and out like he couldn’t stop himself from moving. His hips twitched, and she could see the fins on his back had risen all the way.

Oh fuck, I swear it’s about to— He rocked in and a rope of it squeezed out of her, hitting against her clit before more

bubbled behind it to drip through her folds and down the crease of her backside.

Orpheus wanted to fill her with it, and he had to the point it didn't all fit. It started dripping down her stomach before he finished.

They both panted and huffed as they held each other in a tight embrace. Against her chest, she could feel his heartbeat was heavy and fast. It matched the one inside her that reached a place no human would ever, *ever* reach.

I can never go back, she thought, her eyes bowing as she felt him fluttering inside her so intimately. Reia had adored this. Nothing had ever felt this amazing, and after taking all of him, she knew no human would be able to satisfy her.

She wanted to feel dread, to be upset, but all she could do was bask in this blissful afterglow. She clutched him tighter, and he started rubbing the side of his snout against her head above her ear in affection.

He was cuddling her, nuzzling her, being so gentle after he'd just pounded into her like a wild beast, almost like he'd been holding this in. And yet, she knew that he must have still held back, that he hadn't given her everything.

"Are you okay?" His voice held so much concern and sincerity in it. She nodded, stemming the want to cry in confusion, in satisfaction, to weep like an idiot at the pleasure he'd just given her. To literally weep around his cock. "You are not hurt, are you?"

He was playing with her heart strings, and she felt them ache in her chest. And when she looked up through his fur and her lashes to find his glowing eyes were pink, she felt them tug harder.

It's not fair that he's so sweet.

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Orpheus woke with a terrible ache in his groin. The kind that was prominent and piercing down his cock, unable to be ignored. He kept his vision dark, but his mind was waking.

He panted, drawing the softness and warmth that was Reia in his embrace closer, grinding his hips against her plump backside. Just that bare stroke was enough to make him shudder.

She'd fallen sleep in his arms not long after they'd had sex and he'd clutched her to him, content with her asleep in his arms, in his bed, under his furs, naked and limp from pleasure against him. Her faint breaths had lulled him under, her light heartbeat felt through her back and radiating into his chest had been soothing.

He should be asleep still, but he was restless.

In every draw in of breath, he took in her elderberry and red roses scent, but that was just the base. There was the smell of her sweet arousal, her tangy orgasms mixed in with his lubricant and his seed. She was a tangled mix of scents that told him on every intake that he'd just fucked her.

The stench of it was driving him mad. She was marked in its evidence, in the scent of his body and come, and he wanted *more.*

Orpheus hissed in a breath when his hips uncontrollably moved forward, his cock seeking the nursing comfort of warmth and inner walls sheltering it.

He moved his arm from on top of her and grabbed it. *I've extruded.* In his sleep, bombarded by different sensations, his cock had extended all the way past his tentacles that weren't holding it back.

It ached in a way no human could understand. There was a reason his tentacles held his shaft back. It didn't like being uncovered for long periods of time and required the wet warmth of them or to be buried in his slit, or hers, and it stung to be unsheltered for this long without stimulation to make his lubricant seep out. He could only imagine how long he'd been this engorged and free.

His body was excited from earlier, from having felt Reia finally, being connected to her and having her want to share their bodies.

But she was asleep, and he was ashamed that he'd allowed himself to get to this deeply aroused state when she may feel vulnerable.

Using the palm of his hand, he pulled his hips away from her and started pushing down. He held back his whimpers as he tried to stem his shudders of revulsion at what he was doing. Uncomfortable pain radiated across his groin and his cock protested.

He was too engorged to do this, too hard, but he shoved down anyway. His tentacles twisted around, trying to aid him and waiting for him to push down enough that they could encompass it all the way to the head.

Tension was stiffening his muscles, making his fur and fins raise.

There was no sigh of relief when they wrapped around him completely. Not when the base was putting severe pressure on his insides behind his seam.

"Orpheus?" he heard her sleep-filled and groggy voice ask.

“Sorry,” he rasped, wiping his hand on the fur of his thigh to remove his lubricant from it, that was thicker than normal from drying out, so he could rub her arm soothingly. “I didn’t mean to wake you. Go back to sleep.”

I don’t want her to leave my arms. He wanted her to stay here more than anything so he could hold her.

“Is something the matter?” She rolled over slightly by twisting to her back.

He had to duck his hips back, so she didn’t feel his cock was still partially extruded to the length of his tentacles that fought to keep it back.

“Nothing is the matter.” He blindly ducked his head forward to nuzzle her, not daring to open his sight.

“Then why are you shaking?”

That was because he was fighting his own body.

Her hand reached behind her to feel him, and her fingers brushed the back of his tentacles. He expected her hand to recoil away, but instead she stroked them like she was trying to understand if what she was feeling was really there.

“You’re aroused?” The croak in her voice reminded him that moments before she had been asleep, and guilt soared through him harder.

“I am sorry,” he apologised again, opening his sight that was a deep purple so he could find her cheek safely and nuzzle his snout against it. “Go back to sleep. I will not touch you. I would like to keep holding you while you rest.”

There were no candles lit, and the only thing she would be able to see was the glow of his orbs highlighting his skull.

She reached back to cup his snout, grazing her hand up and down the length of it.

“I liked you inside me,” she told him, and his cock almost shot forward, making his body jolt as the tentacles pulled to fight it. She turned her head and kissed the other side of his face. “If you want to, you can.”

“But you were sleeping, Reia,” he said, tilting his head in confusion.

“I don’t mind.” She kissed him again, her lips soft against the fangs of his mouth. “You don’t have to be so hesitant with me, Orpheus. Anytime you want me, take me. I want you to.”

“Anytime?” he asked, slipping his arms around her as he brought himself closer.

“Whenever you want. If I don’t want to, I’ll tell you.”

Anytime... Whenever I want? Orpheus groaned, rolling forward until he was lying on top with her face down on her stomach. His legs were around hers that were straight and clamped between his thighs.

“How about now?”

He drew his tongue from between her shoulders blades and up until he was slipping it over her neck and the corner of her jaw.

She spread her thighs as far as his own would let them go, leaving the tiniest gap to present herself with. Then she rolled her hips back, stroking the back of his tentacles with the cleft of her cheeks.

“Yes.”

Inside. I need inside. He lifted his body enough so that he could see as he looked down the valley of their bodies. *I need her cunt around me.* The warm, wet, rippling well of her pussy. He needed it to comfort him, to nurse his aching cock.

He lowered his hips until the tips of his tentacles were at her entrance from behind. His jaws parted as he released a shuddering breath when they loosened just enough that his cock could start to slowly extend – straight into her body.

Her channel was tight, snug, and swollen, but she released a little cry of need as he inch-by-slow-inch stretched and filled her.

“Reia,” he groaned when he was fully extended and needed to push his hips forward so he could sink inside fully.

He shuddered as she moaned when he was seated all the way. He lowered his body so he could wrap his arms underneath her to hold her to him.

One slipped from her side and through the valley of her breasts so he could cup her throat and jaw gently in an attempt to support her head in this position. The other gripped her hip on the other side.

He wanted to cover every inch of her body, envelope it completely in his strength and be gentle in contrast. To have her under him like he was a shield for her from the outside world.

She is so precious. Her heart, her mind, her body, her *soul*, and he wanted to touch all of it. He felt as though the only way he could was if he was inside her like this. Where neither of them knew where one ended and the other began.

His mind was hazy as he started to draw back as far as his tentacles wrapped over her hips would allow him to go. Yet, he didn't want to be frenzied with her this time, didn't want to pound her in a craze like before.

He wanted to be slow, to give her deep thrusts so she could feel all of him, every thick inch, every frill, the mushroom head gliding along her walls. And he wanted to feel her pussy, the wetness of it, the ripples of her texture that would never be the same as another, the bumps and how it swelled around him.

How it fluttered with her heartbeat and clamped him over and over like her inner walls wanted to suck his cock back in when he withdrew. That feeling was intense, like she didn't want to let go of him, wanted him inside, wanted him to stay there forever.

Her cries were quiet, soft, and high-pitched, but sounded lost.

She didn't have to do anything, he was enamoured with this, and he didn't want her to. He just wanted her to enjoy

him taking her, wanted her to stay lax so he could play with her insides while she felt it all.

Her hands moved so she could grip the furs beneath her, and he let her, knowing she needed something to hold onto. But he kept her hips down when she tried to push back on him and gyrate them in return.

His chest felt tight with emotion.

Mine, he internally growled to himself. He wanted this forever. He wanted to keep her eternally, to embrace her like this. To touch her, tease her, care for her, make her moan, but also laugh and smile.

He wanted to love her, wanted to know what that felt like. He wanted her to teach him how by loving him.

She started coming around him and the feeling was pure, absolute bliss. Her pussy clenched him while it bore down on him with unbelievable pressure, spasming wildly, as it tried to milk him.

I want her. Her voice, her scent, her taste, the vision that was her beauty. *I need her soul.* He hungered for it, yearned for it.

He came in a little harder, green flicking in his vision. *I fucking need it.* Her body was his, he knew it as he stroked her walls with his cock, but he wanted more than that.

The hand gripping her hip lowered so he could cup where he was thrusting and hold her folds and pussy in his palm. *This is mine. Only I can have it now.* A tremor rolled through him as his eyes flashed green again and each thrust brought a battle in his sight.

The deep purple of desire and the bright green of possession.

He dug his fingertips into her skin both around her jaw and her pussy, his claws digging into her plump backside as his large hand could reach all the way back.

Green won out and he slipped his tongue over her cheek as he came in harder and deeper than ever, grinding over her body in heavy waves.

“Your pussy is mine,” he growled, his breaths growing more rapid as possessive and aggressive lust took control. “And I’m going to fill it with my seed every day.”

“Oh, Orpheus,” she moaned, her head tilting back as her inner walls spasmed.

His name on her lips sang with a moan nearly felled him.

“Tell me I can, Reia,” he demanded, the bells she’d given to him starting to ring now that his body was moving more in his jarring slams. “Tell me I own it, can fuck it, can give it my semen to hold. Can use it to make you come and scream for me. That it is mine to pleasure you with.”

Her knuckles turned white as she fisted the furs of the bed, her body trembling and squirming as she started to come again, milking him in feral clamps that was demanding its due.

“Oh, God!” she cried.

“There are no Gods in an unholy place like the Veil, Reia.” His hand around her jaw moved up so he could slip two claws and fingertips into her mouth, keeping it open so she would be louder. “Now answer me.”

He needed her to tell him. He needed to know it was his even if she wouldn’t give him her soul. That he owned something of hers for now. *For now.*

“Yes, yes!” she shouted around his fingers. “It’s yours.”

He let her mouth go and moved his hand down back to where it was before, cradling her head for her so it wasn’t bent back awkwardly.

He continued to move, continued to thrust into her until his spine tingled and his tentacles clamped tighter, making it impossible for him to back away even if she wanted him to.

He pushed deep, feeling the ring of her cervix press tightly against the tip of his cock. His body quaked as his bulges tightened and drew inwards, and then he groaned when they started to empty into her channel.

He pumped his hips lightly, as much as he could, as overwhelming pleasure gripped his groin. *So good, feels so good.* Each burst had his hips twitching, his legs shaking, his arms trembling around her.

Her channel filled and overflowed. He didn't give her as much as before, but his seed from earlier was still present and mingled with the new loads he gave her.

Falling to the side when he was done, he dragged her with him to clutch her in a desperate need to hold her as his lust faded away to tenderness. He closed his sight as he heaved with aftershocks twitching him.

I have waited eons for her.

For this woman that had seen Orpheus for what he was, who he was, and still wanted him. For this wonderful creature that was accepting him and allowing him to be himself as he slowly showed it to her. To be greeted in return rather than recoiled from.

Every offering, every human before her, was an inevitable disastrous step so that he could possess her instead.

For all the pain he'd felt, the loneliness, all the loss and grief, he was starting to feel as though it was all worth it just so he could have his little doe placid, well-pleasured, and lax in his embrace.

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Reia slowly stirred from her slumber, different parts of her body telling her she needed to wake.

Her stomach as it lightly grumbled, telling her she hadn't eaten in forever. Her throat that was parched and needed hydrating. Her bladder that was beginning to become uncomfortable. Her mind that knew she'd been sleeping much later than she usually did.

She lazily blinked open her eyes to find the room was bright. The day was late. So late, in fact, she knew the sun would be long gone from the garden, and she'd missed her chance to sit in it for breakfast.

Shit, it's like I can still feel him. There was a pressure at her entrance, inside her channel, and she squirmed lightly.

She paused when that pressure *stirred*.

She looked down to find dark purple and black tentacles wrapped tightly around her naked hips. He *was* still inside her! It didn't feel hard, like it was just resting there.

Clenching her eyes shut, she brought her hands to her mouth to cover them. *Oh god, I had sex with him... Twice!* She knew very vividly she'd asked for it both times, but she'd been half-asleep the second time, and her body had still been singing from the first.

I told him he could take me whenever he wanted.

She hoped she didn’t come to regret that. She’d felt rather close to him sleeping in his arms after being intimate. She had felt warm and fuzzy. And knowing he’d been struggling just because he didn’t want to bother her with himself, his needs, had made her heart nearly ache out of her damn chest.

Since Orpheus had brought her here, it had been about what she wanted, when she needed release. In her heart, she knew she didn’t want that anymore. It wasn’t fair. If she could have it whenever she wanted, then wasn’t it equal for him to be able to do the same?

She’d enjoyed every touch, and she’d… loved having sex with him. There was something about it that made her feel so connected to him, to another being. It felt like he’d been a *part* of her.

She looked down once more. *I guess he’s still a part of me.*

There was another sensation vibrating through her, one that was trying to convince her to never leave this embrace. A deep, near-silent purr was rumbling from his chest against her back, telling her he was adoring this intimate cuddle just as much as she was.

His head was above hers, resting against her pillow rather than his own, and when she turned her head just enough, she could see that his eyes were blue.

“You’re awake?” she asked, feeling his slow and steady breaths expanding his chest and pressing into her, tricking her into thinking he’d been asleep.

He lifted his head and licked at her cheek.

“Have been for quite some time.”

Her cheeks flared with heat, and she bowed her head.

He stayed with me like this for a while? Minutes? Hours? How long had Orpheus been awake, basking in her like this?

“How come you’re still inside me? Doesn’t it usually go back inside you?”

He licked behind her ear since she’d hidden her face.

“As long as it is sheltered in something warm and wet, it doesn’t matter where it is. You said I could be inside you whenever I wanted. I chose to rest with it lying in you.”

He wasn’t being sexual, it wasn’t hard. It was strange, but this was one of the sweetest things she’d ever heard or experienced.

Was it possible for someone to fuck their way into someone’s heart? Because it felt like he’d done that. Emotions, stronger than ever, were swirling within her. Ones that hadn’t been so prevalent before last night.

He licked behind her ear again but twisted his head to follow along the deep scar behind it. He then grasped her knee where her other scar was.

“Why is it you have these scars?” His voice was laced in curiosity, and she knew he would one day ask her about them.

She just didn’t think it would be now.

“I-I don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbled.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not nice, and I don’t want to ruin this.”

She was enjoying their cuddle. She didn’t want to bring up terrible memories.

A deep growl began to rumble from him, and he slipped his hand forward to cup her cheek that was resting against the pillow to turn her face towards him. He was leaning over her, his eyes already starting to glow a faint red.

“Did someone hurt you, Reia?”

She sighed, seeing no way to escape this.

“I told you the villagers called me the harbinger of bad omens. Well, a few of them thought it would be just a fantastic idea to throw a large rock at me. It hit me in the head. I blacked out and cut my knee when I fell on the ground.”

“Your own people hurt you?” he snarled, his eyes brightening into crimson.

“It’s fine, Orpheus.” She placed her forehead against him. “It was a long time ago. Those men were arseholes anyway.”

That didn’t placate him, didn’t make his chest stop rumbling with that aggressive noise. She already missed his strange purr.

“You are precious. No one is allowed to hurt you. I can kill them for you if you like.”

Reia giggled, reaching up to stroke his jaw from underneath. “Could you? I would really like that.”

Her humour reached him, and he huffed loudly in irritation.

“If you want me to, I will. I will do anything for you.”

Oooo, you guys don’t know what’s coming! Because Reia was seriously considering it. It wasn’t the first, nor the last time those three men terrorised her. *Grown* men almost the same age as her, and she despised them for everything they’d done.

They’d thrown food at her instead of giving it to her like they were supposed to. Threw water on her. Nailed her house shut so she couldn’t get inside when it was dark and unsafe to be outside, even in the village.

They’d teased and bullied her relentlessly that her family was dead. Mocking her, their deaths, playacting as if they were her family while one of them pretended to be the Demon killing and eating them. Whenever they mentioned her baby brother, pretended to cry and wail, it always filled her with so much rage that she tried to fight them.

Of course, then she would be reprimanded for shouting and touching others – even though it was in retaliation.

The ringleader of the group’s father had been one of the men travelling back with her that died the day after her parents were eaten. They blamed her for it.

No one in the village did anything to stop them, and some actually laughed while they did. Some were disapproving, but that was more because they were worried about

unsettling the universe because of what they believed she was.

I still can't believe being a harbinger isn't real.

Her stomach chose that moment to be as loud as freaking possible and grumbled like that of a deep rumbling thunderstorm.

"You are hungry," he said, and his tentacles started to loosen from her so he could withdraw.

Wait, no. Reia didn't care about her stomach right then, but he'd slipped out of her before she could stop him. Her heart sunk at the loss she felt.

She sat up and turned to face him as he started to get up. She squeaked, quickly getting to her knees to squeeze her bent legs together as she sat on her ankles. She clutched at her thighs, recoiling at the sensation she felt.

"Reia?" he quickly questioned, kneeling on the bed at the sound she made, and her suddenly sitting up like this. "Is something wrong?"

Shit. How was she supposed to explain that she could feel his seed coming out of her!? That she'd reacted to her body letting go of it now that he'd exited her and was currently making a mess between her thighs that felt like a trickling, tickling sensation.

"I'm okay," she laughed, looking down to his crotch while he was kneeling on the bed, and almost ended it with a giggle.

Although still quite large, his cock was floppy, his tentacles too. *That's cute.* It didn't look like the monster that had made her melt so much she felt like she was going to pool out of her very own skin.

The tentacles were already moving around it to shield it and eventually would hide it away.

"Then what is wrong?" He reached across the bed, his head twisting sideways, as he went to place his clawed index and middle finger to her cheek in what she thought was worry. She only flinched, clenching her eyes shut,

because she could feel another clump leaving her and wanted to die in embarrassment. “Have I hurt you or upset you?”

She shook her head.

“I really need a bath. We’ve made a mess.”

Well, he made the mess. She was currently living the emotional nightmare of it.

“Do not mind the mess,” he chuckled. Only because he wasn’t the one dealing with it! “You must eat first. You are so hungry that your stomach is being loud. Plus, I like you covered in my seed, marking you with my scent of sex.”

Someone please kill me. Her cheeks were so hot, she felt like even her ears were on fire.

“Why are you so naughty sometimes?” she groaned.

When the sensation finally ceased, she relaxed enough to open her eyes.

His orbs flashed white, and he shrunk a little.

“You don’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that.” She shook her head with a snort of laughter. “I like it a lot. It’s just that you usually don’t talk like that, but you’re very naughty when it comes to sex. I don’t understand why.”

He leaned forward to bump his snout against her temple. “We are sharing bodies. Why can I not share my thoughts as well? You accept my desire for you, and I would like to tell you how much I want you so that you know.”

He’s just sharing his feelings? Her lips curled, unable to keep the smile from her features.

“I would like for you to do the same. I enjoyed hearing you say you wanted my cock.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do it.” She could barely even think last night because it felt so good, and she’d always had a hard time asking to be touched. It didn’t feel natural.

Reia just wanted it to happen, which is why she’d told him he could touch her whenever he wanted.

Orpheus chuckled while licking her cheek.

“Well, if you want to, know that I very much want to hear you speak *‘naughty’* to me.”

It almost felt like he was mocking her!

“Okay, I got it!” she squealed as she pushed his head away. “Food. Your human would like food now!”

He leaned back and gave her a huff, like he was enjoying this. “You stay and rest, then. What would you like to eat?”

“Raspberries and strawberries? Can I have some water too?”

“Yes. I’ll make sure you get everything you need.” Then his eyes started to turn into a reddish-pink. “You aren’t sore or hurt, are you? I didn’t mean to be so rough.”

“No, Orpheus. I’m fine, I promise.”

She was a little tender, but nothing she could truly complain about. More than anything, it was her legs that ached from being stretched around his wide waist. He was bigger than her in every way, and their bodies didn’t quite mesh perfectly, as evidenced by the fact he needed to fucking change her body to fit inside!

He backed off the bed, allowing her to stay kneeling on it, and walked around to the foot of it to grab his pants.

Oh my gosh! Reia started to crawl forward while reaching out to him. *He has a tail!* It was about a foot in length and curled up like that of a deer.

He turned his head back and tapped her hand away!

“Don’t touch,” he warned.

“But you have a tail!”

And it looked so soft and fluffy.

“You can touch anywhere you like, but my tail.” He reached back to fist it and hide it from her.

Reia pouted while looking up at him.

“Does it move?”

Picturing Orpheus wagging his tail when excited was freaking adorable.

“Only when irritated or my body is disturbed,” he answered darkly. “And it is very sensitive. I feel it all the way up my spine.”

She wondered if he meant disturbed like when he was shuddering. *Did it wiggle when he came?* She thought she might have felt something fluttering against her foot.

“So, it bothers you? Like when you tickle my feet in the bath, and I ask you to stop, and you don’t?”

“That makes you laugh though,” he answered plainly, stabbing his leg into his pants before the other. “And I like it when you laugh.”

“But it’s a laugh of torture!”

He gave a warm chuckle. “I know.”

Bastard. She pouted further and folded her arms across her chest. That’s when she remembered she was naked as her breasts slipped awkwardly between them. She shrugged, unabashed in front of him.

“Rest, Reia. I will be back.”

He left, leaving her by herself to mull everything over.

She got up to go to the chamber pot so she could empty her uncomfortable bladder. She placed the lid back on top of it, washed her hands, and thought as she returned to his sleeping room and sat on the edge of the bed.

I have a big, scary Duskwalker that’s willing to get revenge for me, a naughty man happy to ruin my insides, and a strange creature who is actually a sweetheart. She let out a content sigh. *I have a home that’s warm, cosy, and has everything I could possibly need or want, with a pretty garden with food just for me.*

What more could she possibly want? Freedom? *Aren’t I technically free here, though?* Reia could do whatever she wanted, go wherever she wanted as long as it was within the safety borders of this place.

He took me to the Demon village. I wonder if Orpheus would one day feel comfortable taking me above the surface so I can travel. It was possible.

If she got good with her sword, like really good, she thought she might be able to convince him. *If I can prove I can stand against a strong Demon, I bet he would feel confident.*

She wasn't afraid of them, and with Orpheus by her side protecting her, she doubted she'd be in any real danger. *Maybe that's why the Witch Owl gave me those books.*

Perhaps she could use one of the heroic children's tales to prove to him she could be just as brave and strong as the heroes inside them. The information book on creatures would allow him to know she understood the dangers.

And that sword training book... That must be why she gave them to me. Reia would stay with Orpheus if he would allow her to travel.

Perhaps not far, but enough so she saw a little of the world. *But I've already seen more than any human ever will.*

She'd want to come back here. She liked their home. But being able to leave it *with* him sounded like a wonderful future.

He... He said he might if I gave him my soul. Could she do it? *I don't know if I want to live forever.* It sounded too long, and she'd barely liked her life up until now.

Yet, within her mind, she knew she could live with Orpheus for eternity. If this was the way he was, caring, thoughtful, naughty, then she didn't think she could ever possibly tire of him.

I don't want to leave anymore. Not after last night, not after how special and well-pleasured she could feel.

So where did that leave her? What would happen if Reia began to turn old and grey? *Would he no longer want me?* Her stomach twisted. Perhaps he may only want a young and youthful looking human.

Would he eat me then? Abandon me? Her stomach twisted further with the idea that he would allow her to die peacefully here but obtain a new human. *Shit... Why does the idea of Orpheus being with another hurt?*

Orpheus returned with a bowl filled with fruit and a cup of water. She took it from him with a weak smile as a sore pang remained in her heart, drinking the water first.

I don't want to ask him what I would have to do to give him my soul, what would happen to me. She didn't want to get his hopes up when she was too afraid of it.

She also didn't want to know the answers to her other questions. They were in the long distant future. She shouldn't dwell on them for now.

"While you are eating, I will wash and then refill the bath for you."

She paused with a spoonful of raspberries as he was leaving again. She knew he must use the bath considering how big it was, but she'd never known when he was.

When she was done, she placed everything on the side table closest to her, then stared down at her body.

I... feel really sticky and slimy. Her inner thighs were coated in semen.

It didn't take her much to make her decision to walk to the washroom and peek inside.

It was dim. He hadn't lit any of the candles yet, and the only light was coming from the hallway as she opened the door.

She caught his glowing orbs and heard the bells jingle, the only indication he tilted his head since he was facing her.

"Is something the matter?"

"I really want a bath. If you don't mind, can I just hop in with you?"

His orbs turned yellow, and she wondered if that was in happiness or curiosity. "If you would like to."

She didn't hesitate. She opened the door further, allowing more light to filter in so she could see. She walked over and slipped into the opposite side to face him.

He moved his legs to the side to allow her between them, and he kept his head tilted as she settled. Her body shivered

at the goosebumps that rose on her flesh from the delectable heat.

It relaxed her sore muscles, and she melted into the water that was much higher than normal. It came to her collar bones, almost submerging her completely, when usually it only came to just her breast height.

“Why were you in the dark?”

“Because I could see.”

Oh, that makes sense. She leaned her head back to wet her hair.

“If... If we’re going to do what we did last night again, maybe you should start doing your spell in the mornings instead.” If there was a possibility of being covered in mess at night, she didn’t want to have two baths, one for actual cleaning and the other for the spell. Two birds, one stone.

“We can do that, but I cannot do it now,” he answered. “The oil clings to my fur, and I don’t like it. I will do it once I leave the water.”

She nodded, happy with that answer. Plus, the idea of him bathing her while he was in the water with her might be too much. She already got aroused when he wasn’t, and she thought if he was, she’d probably jump him, and she was a little tired.

Reia stared at him, her earlier thoughts still whirling around in her skull. They were giving her a slight headache, and she worried her bottom lip until she felt him cup one of her calves.

“Orpheus...” she started hesitantly, unsure if she should ask her question. *But I want to know.* “What happened to the woman that stayed with you here?”

“She is gone. That is all that matters.”

“Please? I want to know about her. How she came to be here. You built this house for her…” She gestured to the walls around her. “I want to know why she is gone.”

Why didn’t she give you her soul?

That was what she really wanted to know.

His head turned to the side to look away, before it pointed down, then forward once more.

“I don’t know why she is gone,” he said. His eyes turned to blue then started to darken. “And it was a long time ago, Reia.”

“Well, how did you end up bringing her here in the first place?”

“I was like the Mavka that went to the Demon village with us when I found her. It was nearly two-hundred years ago, and I was... hunting humans specifically. I realised that I could gain humanity by eating your kind, and I wanted more of it. Reia, I...”

He fell silent, struggled to continue as that reddish-pink of embarrassment flashed into his orbs before going back to the deep blue. She lifted her leg and placed it on top of his, showing by touching him that it was okay.

“Continue, Orpheus. I’m not going to judge you, no matter what happened.”

“I... I was not good, Reia. I hunted many humans. I hunted for homes by themselves because I knew there would be many and entered them to devour everyone inside. When I entered her house, I found her alone. She didn’t smell of fear, and she was holding a knife with the intention of trying to kill me because she’d seen me approaching.” He placed his hand on her shin, rubbing it like he was trying to soothe himself rather than her. “She didn’t get the chance to try. My curiosity about her was the only reason I didn’t eat her. I had never encountered a human with no fear before, and I didn’t understand why I couldn’t smell it. Why she wasn’t making me hungry.”

He let out a heavy, shaking breath before continuing.

“I wanted to take her with me back to my home, and she didn’t fight me. When I asked her about it later, she said it was because she hadn’t wanted to die.” He gave a chuckle that held no humour. “She did not bleed like you do. I don’t

know why, but it meant I was not compelled to eat her once a month. I was very curious about her."

She didn't bleed? She must have been infertile.

Once more, that reddish-pink flashed, and he looked away from Reia with his fingers digging into her leg. He sheathed his claws when he realised he was digging them into her.

"She let me do whatever I wanted to with her as long as I did for things for her. She told me she hated my cave and missed living in a house, so I built one for her. She needed human food, so I scavenged for it before I found seeds, and she grew the garden. I was already able to produce my protection spell, and it was the size of the clearing this house is in now. She said she didn't want the trees, hated being in the dark, so I cut them down until she could see and feel the sun. She never left the protections, didn't try to run away. She stayed, and I thought it was because she liked me as much as I became attached to her. She... She was the one who gave me my name."

He fell silent, and she could feel his body tensing, that he was shuddering in aversion to his own story.

She was the one that named him?

"It's okay," she said, giving him a small smile of reassurance as she placed her hand around his ankle that was next to her.

He whined in response instead, fidgeting further.

She brought her lips into her mouth and bit down on them. *This is really hurting him.* She couldn't force him to continue, not when she could see how much it was.

"It's alright, you don't have to tell me anymore."

"I want to, Reia. It's just... I wanted her soul, and she said no. That she wasn't ready. That I hadn't done enough to earn it. She said she would consider it if I took her to the Demon village. I had left to go there a few times for supplies and I explained what was there. She liked the pretty things that you humans wear, and I traded for them. I let her have whatever she wanted because it made her happy, and I

liked seeing her that way. I shouldn’t have done that, shouldn’t have taken her there. She was seen. And although no one tried to take her from me there, someone else discovered I had a human because of it.”

“Who?”

“The Demon King,” he answered darkly. “He doesn’t like Mavka. We are strong and difficult to kill. He doesn’t like that he can’t control us.”

“He killed her?”

Orpheus shook his head, and she watched as one of his hands came up to dig at his chest, his claws gouging into where his heart was.

“No. He offered to her a way to leave me, and she went with him. She... She told me she hated me, hated every moment with me.” He gouged deeper, and she noticed the water began to have drops of purple blood in it that eventually faded. She had never seen his eyes this dark before, and her heart stung for him. “She said she had been trying to figure out a way she could escape for the entire five years she had stayed with me.”

Reia crawled forward so she could slip her arms around his shoulders and hug him tightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, burying her face into the fur of his neck. “That must have been so hurtful.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed the underneath of his jaw across her back. “What did I do wrong, Reia? Why did she not want to stay with me?”

Tears welled in her eyes for him.

“I-I don’t know. I can’t answer that for you.”

But she wished she could.

Orpheus had done everything within his capabilities to make this woman happy, more than he had for Reia, and she couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t have wanted to be with him. *I do... and I’ve only been here for a month and a half.* This woman had apparently spent five years with him!

She clutched the long fur on his back, her tear-filled eyes narrowing with spite, and perhaps a little jealousy.

This woman had been the one to show Orpheus what touch and sex were, and she was a little jealous she had and didn't seem to appreciate him. After one night, she was lost.

Well, I'm glad she's gone, then. Gone and dead. She was two hundred years in the past and she could rot wherever she died, but she hoped it was in the belly of a Demon. *It would be deserved if she went with the Demon King and was eaten instead of 'saved'.*

"Are..." he started, digging his fingertips into the skin of her back. "Are you going to leave me too?"

Her heart nearly shattered into a million fragments in her chest.

"No, Orpheus." She turned her head and pressed her lips to the side of his bony jaw. "I want to stay with you."

"I like you, Reia. You are special and different to every human I have brought here. You want my touch, let me hold you because you want it. You are beautiful, and strong, and brave enough to face me, even when I am crazed. You protected me when all the others would have let me be eaten. I do not want you to go away. I don't want another human if you disappear."

He doesn't want another human? Does... Does that mean he wouldn't replace me if I died or left? Her tears finally slipped down her cheeks, not understanding what this meant.

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She is upset with me, Orpheus thought as he paced around the living area, walking restlessly between the chairs and in front of the fireplace. Like a mindless dog, he was doing laps as if he was chasing his tail.

A small whine left his chest. *What did I do wrong?*

It had been five days since the night they'd shared their bodies for the first time and he told her of the woman from centuries ago.

Each day, she did different tasks, whether that was tending to the garden or making herself clothing that he was enthralled in watching her make. He liked the clothing she made for herself, never having seeing this kind before, and she looked pretty in them. They were colourful as she used the dyes that were much more effective than the food dyes she'd been using originally.

However, he didn't like it when she pricked her finger on the sewing needle. She'd make a noise of pain, and he'd become distressed that she was hurting herself, only for her to laugh at him like he was being silly.

She made new ornaments for him to hang up. Slowly she was replacing the ones he'd put up centuries ago for the woman who originally wanted them. She seemed very set on this task, wanting to make sure they were gone. Reia

would destroy them by pulling them apart so she could use them for new ones.

The house smelled of strange food he'd never smelt before, like pastries and *cookies.* She used the honey he'd gotten for her in many different things. He'd learned not to eat any of it as it was too sweet and hurt his stomach.

But Orpheus wanted to learn everything she was doing, even if he didn't like the smells and tastes, and she was happy to teach and allow him to spend that time with her.

He didn't stop her from doing anything.

So, he tried to reflect on what he could have done to make Reia upset with him. She had gone to sleep in her bed when she'd spent every night in his since that day.

He'd gone to do a final lap of the yard, making sure there were no cracks in the salt circle and that the withering trinkets were still good for another day or two before needing replacement.

She'd been reading to him before he went outside, each night going through one of the tales in that book the Witch Owl guided her to take.

He had thought all was well and fine – only to discover when he came back inside that she'd gone to sleep, and it hadn't been in his bed.

Scratching at his chest, he tried to figure out why she didn't want to embrace him. He couldn't. He didn't know what he'd done wrong.

As the night grew later and Orpheus found himself too restless to even try to sleep, he snuck into her room while crouching, using one of his hands to steady himself.

He placed the underside of his jaw on the mattress near her chest, her shoulders flat against the bed while her legs were turned slightly. Looking up to her, he gently tapped at her arm.

She stirred, her face frowning before she slowly flickered her eyes open.

“Orpheus?” she asked, her voice hoarse and sleep-filled as she rubbed one of her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Another light whine came from his chest.

“Why are you angry with me, Reia?”

Her brows drew together to create a little crease between them. “I’m not angry with you. Why do you think that?”

He looked over her resting under the furs.

“Then why are you here? You have not slept in this room for days.”

Reia groaned, turning to her back as she brought the fur up to cover her face. “Because I’m really tired tonight.”

“I don’t understand.”

She brought them down to peek at him. “If I sleep with you, you always wake me in the middle of the night.”

He tilted his head, making his bells jingle slightly.

“But you said I could do this.”

“I know.” She let out a small, yet awkward, laugh. “And I like it, but we’ve done it enough today, and I’m really tired tonight. I thought it would be easier if I slept in here.”

His vision turned a reddish-pink. *Am I touching too much?*

He didn’t think it was enough. Orpheus had an insatiable hunger to touch her, a burning need that ate at him constantly. She told him he could take, and he took multiple times a day.

His favourite was over the dining table while she was face down because when he filled her with his seed, her legs would squirm and kick because they free to do so. It was a strange sensation to feel her twist, contort, and move around his cock like that while he was releasing inside her.

He took her wherever she was, and he thought she had liked it.

An ugly emotion spiked in his chest, like guilt, shame, or regret.

“You promised you would tell me if you didn’t want to.”

She reached down to cup his snout affectionately.

“And I am by sleeping in here tonight. Once I have a good sleep, you can be as naughty with me as you like, even in the night.”

This is her way of telling me?

His eyes drifted over her body once more. “But I don’t like this. I want to hold you while we sleep.”

She made a thoughtful noise while twisting her lips to one side. “Well, I guess if its only to hug me, then that’s okay.”

She started to move the furs to get up, and Orpheus darted forward to be with her on the bed that was much too small for him.

“You don’t need to move. You are already comfortable.” He curled himself around her and drew her tightly against him. “Sleep Reia. I’ll protect you and make sure you don’t awaken.”

She turned to him and buried her face against his chest as she cuddled him. “You better not fall asleep on top of me, Orpheus. You’re heavy.”

Then she was asleep, and Orpheus felt as though the world was right once more.

Reia swung her sword through the air, feeling unbalanced.

She darted to the side where there was a stump with a book on it, a rock holding the pages open so the light wind didn’t change the page.

She pressed her fingers on the book, keeping the page from blowing so she could read it properly. *Oh, okay. So, I’m swinging too high.*

Moving away from the sword training guide to make room for herself, she adjusted her grip slightly. Then she swung, bringing the sword up, twisting it over her head, before she sliced downwards in a diagonal swing from the outside of her shoulder rather than directly above it.

The motion felt smooth, didn't cause any twinges in her back or arms, and didn't unbalance her. Because of these changes, it was also faster.

"Yes!" She released one hand from the grip of the hilt and threw her fist in the air. "That was perfect!"

She looked around with a grin, wishing Orpheus was here to see her do that. He was currently travelling to the stream to fetch her water since she was starting to run low.

Ever since she'd gotten the book, her skills with the sword had significantly improved, even in the five days she'd started using it. Every day, she practised for hours. When she was tired, she would do other things while she rested before practising again.

She would sew her own clothes, like the one she currently wore. She wore a pale, baby pink dress from the fabric he'd gotten for her.

Now that the weather was getting warmer, she didn't need long sleeves. It came to the middle of her bicep and was loose enough that when she lifted her arms, it folded to her shoulders. It was low cut and showed the top of her cleavage. She used the brown fabric he'd gotten to sew on a fake corset section that cupped underneath her breasts and highlighted them before coming down at a V just over her navel, wrapping around her waist but leaving her hips free. The skirt of her dress was flowy and came to just below her thighs, and if she was to twirl, it billowed out around her freely.

It was more colourful than anything she'd ever worn, but this was how she'd used to dress when she'd been back in her village.

She loved it and couldn’t wait to make others that were similar in style but different colours.

Reia would also make ornaments in her spare time, slowly getting rid of the ones the other woman had wanted or made herself. Some of them were new, from Orpheus decorating his home to make it more welcoming for the offerings that had followed her. She kept those.

She just wanted to get rid of some of the evidence of the mystery woman. After hearing of the story of her, she now understood Orpheus better.

Looking towards the house, with all the effort he’d gone to, she knew he had always been kind. It didn’t matter what else he had done. She could see he’d tried to be accommodating, had wanted to bring comfort and happiness but had been coldly rejected in return.

Don’t worry, I’ll accept it on her behalf. And she’d return it, add to it, make this a memory holder of her. Someone that cared for him, wanted him, someone who was going to stay with him because she wanted to.

But we will leave it sometimes. She was adamant about it.

She redirected her attention back to her sword, holding it up like she was poised to strike an invisible enemy. *I will get good with my sword and prove he can take me anywhere.*

Her lips curled into a smile of humour.

Maybe I can scare the crap out of him again.

Orpheus usually helped her train, letting her attack a sword he was holding so she actually had something to hit. He didn’t do much, just stood there pointing the sword downwards since he didn’t know how to hold it in his large hands and deflected her blows like an enemy that was defending.

The previous day, she had been using what she’d put into practise and had almost hit him! Not the sword, but him, and he’d stumbled back, barely ducking his body back in time before she sliced into him.

“I think it’s time I make you that wooden sword, my brave human,” he’d chuckled to her.

She’d expected him to be upset, but his eyes had changed to yellow, like he was proud of her. She couldn’t help beaming.

I’m feeling a lot better after getting a good sleep, she thought, practising the same move she’d done before until it was written perfectly in her memories.

Between doing all the many things that took up most of her time, she would find herself pressed up against something and everything. The table, the wall, the kitchen counter, being taken by him as she lost herself around his cock.

She knew a part of it was about release and pleasure, but she understood Orpheus well enough now to know it was also about being close to her. He liked to be near her, affectionate with her, even if it wasn’t sexual.

I still can’t believe he came into my room last night just because he wanted a damn cuddle. She laughed out loud, swiping the droplets of sweat from her brow.

Reia didn’t think sleeping in her bed, that bed – *Is it even my bed anymore? I sleep in his room now* – would upset him so much.

“Whatever. Now I know.”

Turning to collect her book so she could go inside since she was tired, she froze. *Who the fuck is that?!*

She lifted her sword to point the tip of it across the yard at the *person* who had been watching her from the other side of the salt circle.

He’d been behind her, so she hadn’t been able to see him, but he looked like a human and also very much *didn’t*. She knew it was a he by the fact he was shirtless and wearing nothing but a pair of genie-like maroon pants that were tucked around his knees for clothing.

“Who are you?” she asked, while she looked him over to figure out *what* he was.

Even with the distance between them, she could tell he was tall, too tall to be human. The streaking black over his sides, outer flesh of his arms that ran up over his shoulders, sides of his neck, and over his face through his hairline, told her he was probably a Demon. But the rest of him, which was most of him, was covered in darkly-tanned skin.

His eyes weren't red, but he had pointed ears like the pictures of the Elves she'd seen in her book from the Witch Owl. There were also two horns that were dark and curling back over his long blueish-white hair.

His bulky arms were folded over a muscular chest, puffing them, while eight rock-hard abs were shadowed by them from the sun.

Since he wasn't wearing a shirt, multiple gold chains hung from his neck in loops. He also had multiple arm bands, significantly more on his left arm, and long earrings dangled from those pointed ears.

He grinned, flashing sharp teeth behind his full lips.

"I was wondering how long it would take for you to notice me," he chuckled with a deep baritone voice. "I've been standing here since the Mavka left."

Reia's face paled. *Orpheus has been gone for over an hour.* She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed him standing there.

"You still didn't answer my question."

"You may call me Jabez, and I mean you no harm." His grin grew wider, crinkling the corners of his eyes that appeared brown or perhaps another dark colour from afar.

Reia still hadn't figured out what he was, but she couldn't help finding him... handsome. Too handsome. Like it wasn't normal or natural. With all the muscle and gold jewellery, he looked like some kind of God of sensuality, sexuality. A being that screamed an outward appearance of erotic and seductive.

"Says the person standing on the *other* side of the salt circle," she sneered, twisting her upper lip at him.

He cocked a brow at her, like he was surprised about something. Perhaps it was because of her brash tone, or that she wasn't immediately fawning over this sexy looking man that was doing very little to entice her.

"Oh?" He unfolded one arm to point his index finger to the ground. "You mean this salt circle?" He lifted his leg slowly, and stepped *through* it, standing within it alongside Reia. "See, no harm at all, little human."

She raised her sword higher even though they were still metres apart. *Just because he doesn't mean me harm now, doesn't mean he won't later.* The Mavka had stepped through it and still tried to eat her after being attacked by the flying Demon.

"I'll have you know, I'm not actually that little," she told him. She found it cute when Orpheus called her that, but hearing it from him caused her skin to raise in goosebumps with apprehension. "I'm pretty average for a human."

He began to step closer. "All your kind are small to me."

"Stay back!" she warned, her eyes darting towards the front porch.

Can I make it? It wasn't that far.

When she looked forward, he was almost in front of her, and she stumbled back to put space between them. *How did he get so close all of a sudden?*

He was almost at the tip of her sword. He grabbed it between his clawed thumb and index finger as if he was pinching it, turning his head one way and then other to examine it. Now she understood why he'd called her little.

He wasn't as tall as Orpheus, but he was still huge. Maybe only three inches shorter.

"This will not kill me," he said, examining it with a bored expression. Then he turned his gaze to her, brightening into something that looked heated with his sharp, white eyebrows. "But it will hurt. And you don't want to hurt me human, not when I offer you salvation."

Reia narrowed her eyes at him, her lips thinning in irritation as she yanked her sword from him to point it at his chest once more. A billow of wind wrapped around their bodies, chilling her slightly.

“And just what do I need saving from?”

“You’re the captive of a Mavka, aren’t you?” He reached his hand out to her palm facing up, offering for her to take it. “I will give you freedom.”

“Even if I wanted freedom, I’m not stupid enough to think anything comes without a price.” Reia continued to back up, slowly, but steadily, making her way towards the house. “You want something from me. What is it?”

“It is not about what *I* want, but what another demands.” His grin softened, as if he wanted to appear more welcoming, and in doing so came across less trustworthy. “You are nothing but a pawn, and I am offering you the chance to go back to your people safely in exchange.”

Reia snorted a laugh, her lips curling into a smirk while her eyes were filled with a glare.

“You’ve worded your offer very well, but I can see the danger lurking in it.”

His brow cocked again, his lips twitching like his smile was threatening to fall.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re offering me a *chance,* not a guarantee.” She sliced her sword up so the sharp tip was pointing at his nose. “And pawns are usually insignificant to the grand plans in a game of chess. They are sacrificed without care and are often the first to die.”

He flashed his fangs while grinning once more.

“Regardless, if they are pushed forward, they are eaten by the choices of the attacking player, and I cannot guarantee what the Mavka will do.”

Her back stiffened. *He’s after Orpheus.* She didn’t care why. There was a threat to him, and that’s all she needed to know.

“Well, it’s too bad for you that I have no intention of going with you, so you can kindly fuck off.”

She stabbed forward, making him duck his head back, so she could get enough space between them to bolt towards the house.

Jabez *materialised* in front of her right before she reached the steps. Reia ran into his chest, his body like a hard wall and knocking the wind out of her. Groaning, she stumbled back as pain radiated through her nose since she’d bashed it.

“That was close. I didn’t expect you to do that.” He grabbed her arm holding the sword while wrapping his arm around her torso to trap her. “Now, let’s get this off you. The Witch Owl will sneak into my castle and steal it back anyway.”

He grabbed the amulet on her head, hissing in a sharp breath, as he tore it from her head. Reia cried out when he pulled multiple strands of her hair before he tossed it to the ground.

“Fuck! I hate that thing,” he bit, wiping his burnt hand on his chest like he was attempting to soothe it. “Always burns.”

She pushed against him but was unable to break free of his hold. She uselessly swung her sword, trying to cut him with it, but it only swayed behind his back.

“Get off me!”

Since she couldn’t use her arms, she started kicking him in the shins with the heels of her boots and stepped on his bare feet, trying anything to get away from him.

“Quiet,” he snapped, slipping his wrapped arm around her more until he was covering her mouth his large hand. “If he is close, I don’t want him to hear you struggling. My scent being here is enough for him to know you have come with me.”

His hand muffled her shout of ‘no’ while she was shaking her head, her eyes wide.

No, I don’t want to go! Reia fought harder, squirming with every fibre of her being to get away from him. *He said castle.*

He’s... Reia tried to look over her shoulder when she heard a roar in the distance not too far away. Orpheus was close, and knew she wasn’t alone. *He’s the Demon King.*

“Orfes!” she tried to shout against his palm.

They disappeared before she even got the chance to see him.

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Orpheus roared when he smelt the Demon King's scent on the wind coming from the direction of their home. *Reia!* He dropped the full bucket of water and immediately began to sprint.

He broke through the trees minutes later, finding the yard empty as he ran past the salt circle. She wasn't training with her sword like when he'd left to go get her water.

His sight was white, his heart thrumming with fear. *Please be inside.* He darted towards the house, tearing at the grass and dirt with his boots as he focused on the doorway.

Something glittered on the worn-down grass at the porch steps, the dirt more visible here. He slowed when he saw it and then stopped to pick it up, his heart constricting in his chest.

The amulet. It felt warm, like she'd only moments ago been wearing it. He could also tell her scent was fresh here, as well as Jabez's, the Demon King's.

His knees almost buckled.

"No."

He shook his head as he stared down at the blue teardrop sapphire and silver circlet filled with glittering white crystal diamonds.

She can't be gone.

“Reia!” he yelled, going up the porch steps to open the door of the house, wanting to hear her yell back to him.

Silence greeted him when he opened the door. Cold, foreboding silence. He didn’t go inside. He knew she wasn’t there.

“Reia,” he whined, closing his hand around the amulet to fist it. Standing in the doorway, he drifted his gaze over the yard with a heavy heart. “Did... Did she go with him willingly?”

She had her sword. Why didn’t she fight him if she wanted to stay? He couldn’t smell Jabez’s blood, and he wondered if she’d removed the amulet in front of the house as her way of saying she wanted to leave.

But I want her. She was his, and he wanted her more than any other human. *Why?* Had she truly slept in her own bed because she hadn’t wanted to touch him anymore, to be with him anymore?

He opened his hand to stare down at the amulet in sadness and loss, his sight turning blue. *I don’t want to be without her.*

Was history repeating itself? Was the Demon King going to steal another human from him? *But she... Reia isn’t like Katerina* – the woman from centuries ago.

She was warm, and bright, and always held his snout with affectionate hands when she didn’t have to. She petted him, read to him, allowed him to snuggle with her near the fireplace. Katerina had never done any of this.

Katerina had only smiled when she was given something she wanted, and she only ever directed it at what she’d been given. Her smiles never turned towards him like Reia’s were.

She’d never tried to touch Orpheus in return, only accepted it when he wanted it. She’d never slept in his bed, which is why there was a second sleeping room.

She never kissed me.

He’d never felt Katerina’s lips on his body, and yet Reia openly licked Orpheus’ tongue in return, as if she was kissing him back the only way he could.

He’d never noticed the barrier between himself and Katerina. That her narrow eyes were actually glares, that her touches were filled with hate, until after she cruelly told him she was leaving with the Demon King.

And she’d made sure Orpheus had witnessed it. She’d accepted Jabez’s offer, and he’d come back from hunting to find her in the arms of the Demon King. She’d told him that she didn’t want him to come after her, that she was making this choice, and that if he had any care for her happiness, to leave her in peace.

Of course, Orpheus had ran through the forest to go after her in rage, but it was a long distance and he’d lost his anger along the way, left filled only with desperation to not be alone.

When he’d arrived at the castle, she’d told him to go away, and he’d understood there was no point in trying. Jabez had sworn to fight for her, and Orpheus knew that battle would have been one that neither of them would have won.

Reia is not Katerina.

His head tilted to look down into his palm and saw strands of her blonde hair, so bright and shiny in contrast to his dark-grey skin. The bells tied to his horns jingled when he twisted his head, reminding him that Reia had given him a gift when no other had before.

There was more than one or two strands that would have come out naturally with the securing clips. There were clumps of it, like it had been yanked from her head by force.

Orpheus growled. He didn’t know if he was only believing what he wanted to, seeing things that might not mean what they did, but he didn’t care.

Whether Reia went with Jabez willingly or not, he was going to go get his female back this time. She had given

him hope, and he wanted to have faith in her. He placed the amulet in his pocket, ready to give it to her when he saw her.

She is mine.

He would go get her. *She said she wanted to stay with me.*

Turning towards the yard, he started morphing before he even made it down the steps. *She cried for me when I told her of Katerina. She held me and told me she would not do the same.*

With all four limbs on the ground, Orpheus snarled and shook his head wildly, making the bells rattle on purpose to remind himself of them, of her, of her acceptance of him.

Leaping forward, he sprinted in the direction of the Demon King's castle, quickly darting into the trees. His muscles strained under the speed in which he was running, narrowly missing trees as he almost barrelled into them in his haste.

She did not leave me. He refused to believe it. He refused to believe that Reia hadn't wanted him. That her smiles had been lies, that her embraces had been laced with falsities, that her words had been filled with deceit. *She did not forsake me.*

Dirt, sticks, and leaves flung up from his claws as they gouged into the dirt. He paid no mind to the Demons he could see and hear as he ran past, focusing only on the direction he was going, the direction in which Reia was.

Anger filled him, but his eyes were white once more. *She is strong. Brave.* He feared that when he got there, she would be dead in trying to fight her way out. If she was truly kidnapped like he wanted to believe, then she was in danger.

His breaths snorted through his nose hole, wet and heavy with exertion. His vision was only impacted by how fast the forest was moving around him, the mist making it hard to see at this intense pace. Wind whistled past his ear holes and brushed across his bony face that could only feel

intense sensations, like the coldness of the wind, or the soft warm press of her lips.

Scents bombarded him, but he only cared to smell one – and it was of elderberries and red roses.

My little doe will not be prey for anyone but me. And he was the predator that wanted to protect his prey rather than eat it. *If she wants me to save her, then I will fight for her even if it kills me.*

It was a four day's peaceful walk to the castle, but a *determined* Mavka on all fours could make it there in one.

Reia screamed with all her might when she found herself suddenly within the four walls of a stone castle's throne room. Pushing and shoving against the hard torso of the man holding onto her, she knew it was pointless, but refused to stop.

"You sure are trying hard for something so utterly weak," he laughed, before shoving her to the side so hard she crumbled to the ground.

Her sword clattered against the stone, bouncing out of her reach, and slid across the floor when she let it go at the painful impact of her body hitting the ground. A cry was wrenched from her when agony shot through her shoulder and side as her own arm crushed her ribs.

"Hey! I told you not to hurt her," a feminine voice yelled.

Reia looked up just in time to see a woman, a *human* woman, getting up from the large stone throne.

With blue eyes narrowed in irritation at Jabez, she crossed the wide room by going down the steps that led to the lone chair she'd just left to come upon them.

Her hair was as black as midnight, her skin a darker shade of white in comparison to Reia's own pale complexion. Wild freckles dotted her face, and her body was voluptuous while curving beautifully in all the right places.

She wore a long red gown of velvet with gold stitching and a rope that appeared it was made of gold around her hips as it danced down the front of her legs, swaying side-to-side with tassels. Her black slippers were plain, but she had gold bands around her ankles, her wrists, and a necklace with a red ruby in it.

The woman was dressed like a princess, adorned in a fine gown, and wore so many riches that Reia had only ever read about in fairy tales and in history books before the Demons came to desecrate the Earth.

"Yeah, and I told you not to sit on my throne," he sighed, lifting a single hand up as though to struggle. "I am King. I can do what I want, and you should do as you're told."

"When have I ever done what I'm told?" she sneered, scrunching her cute nose up at him.

"All the time," he winked, wiping a reddish-purple tongue over his lips. "Especially when you're on top of me."

Her irritation faded at his wide grin, and she rolled her eyes in return. Well, that plainly explained their relationship.

Reia's lips thinned as her nose crinkled. *She sleeps with him?* Sure, he was pretty in an odd sort of way, but he was a *Demon.* King or not, human-looking or not, he was still one of those creatures.

She may have befriended the cat Demon in the bookstore, but that was as far as she'd go with anything like them.

Then again, Orpheus is not much different, and I care for him. And Jabez was obviously intelligent. He wasn't like the ferocious ones that lurked around her home.

“Can you not be crude?” She sighed loudly while shaking her head at him. “We have a human guest, and I’m sure she’s rather frightened at the moment.”

Kneeling next to Reia to check her wellbeing, she tucked her hair behind her ear adorned with gold jewellery that had red rubies dangling from them.

Reia immediately shuffled backwards on her arse when she reached out to touch her shoulder, putting space between herself and the two others in the room.

“She is not afraid,” Jabez stated as he gestured to her. “There is no smell of fear in her scent.”

The woman looked up at him, before turning her gaze back to Reia. She smiled brightly.

“No wonder you’ve survived so long, then.”

“You’re a human,” Reia gasped.

What is a human doing in the Demon King’s castle? Why was this woman in the Veil at all?

“Please, don’t be surprised,” she said, her welcoming gaze deepening. “You’re not the only one that was taken and hidden in the Veil.”

Even though she had a warm expression, her voice had been laden with *something*. It was almost like she was implying that Reia wasn’t special and shouldn’t pretend she was.

“What’s your name?”

“Reia,” she answered swiftly, unable to stop her eyes from raking over her in confusion.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Reia.”

She gestured her hand out to Jabez who was standing off to the side with his arms folded as though that was what he did when he was being idle. He looked at her palm, and then cocked his brow at it.

It seemed as though she was about to introduce herself in return, but instead she bit out, “Oh, just help me up for goodness sakes.”

She wiggled her fingers expectantly at Jabez.

With a chuckle, he grabbed her hand to pull her to her feet.

Reia stared at the woman's hand when she then offered it to help her up as well. Blinking at it, she wasn't sure what to make of this.

She is being... nice to me. When Reia was taken, she had expected to be terrorized by a heartless maniac. To be threatened to be eaten or something horrible like that. She expected danger and trouble, not for a human woman to greet her welcomingly.

As much as she wanted to smack it away, she didn't.

She did get to her feet by herself, though.

"What do you want from me?"

What was their plan and how could Reia get herself from being no longer involved in it? *I don't have the amulet.* If she tried to run through the Veil back to Orpheus, she wouldn't be able to do it safely. *It's why he probably took it from me.*

She had her sword, but she couldn't survive an attack from multiple Demons at once. And say she could leave and get through the Veil safely – she still had no way to navigate it.

Will Orpheus come for me? She didn't know if that was a good thing or not. Jabez obviously wanted to harm him, and she already didn't trust this woman simply because she was here with him.

"You got me," the woman laughed, clapping her hands together with glee. "I want to get you home, that's all."

She raised her brow at her with doubt, her shoulders rolling back defiantly.

"Why would you want to help me at all?" Then her upper lip began to lift, and she had to stem the growing want to sneer. Reia hoped her inability to keep her emotions off her face didn't cause her trouble. "Who said I even wanted help to begin with?"

“Ooo, I like you. You’ve got fight in you, just like me.” She gestured to Reia’s sword on the ground. “I see you know how to wield a sword. Have you been learning so you can kill Orpheus yourself?”

“No,” she bit, turning her chin up at her.

“That’s good, then. You probably would have died trying anyway.” Then her smile and cheerfulness fell to give Reia a dark look. “But we saw he was helping you, and I thought that was rather odd.”

“What do you mean you saw us?”

“We’ve been watching you,” Jabez interjected, grabbing Reia’s attention.

He waved his hands in the air and a ball that looked as though it was made out of liquid silver began to swirl as he conjured it. Once it was the size of her torso, rolling like waves in a sphere, he threw his hands forward and it flattened into a disc.

An image appeared on it of their home. Their little log cabin surrounded by a clearing and gloomy forest – the view from above like a bird’s eye view.

“We always watch when he obtains a new offering.” Jabez gave a fang-filled grin of humour. “It’s entertaining to see how it will die. One gets eaten by him. Another will get eaten by a Demon running. Some are taken by me when they survive just a little too long.”

Reia’s jaw fell. “You’ve been taking them?”

Orpheus had told her that some were taken, but he’d never told her by who.

“Yes. It’s fun to watch him suffer. Some don’t even make it to the cabin at all.”

“What he’s saying,” the woman said, stepping forward to clasp Reia’s hand by force. “Is that we know what you’ve been through.”

She yanked it away, her touch making her skin crawl because of what she’d just learned. *Shit... We were watched?*

He raised his hand to cup his jaw while looking at the image of the house, while the woman's brows twitched to frown at Reia's sudden, harsh action.

"Can't see in the house, though. Those pesky charms of his keep everything out, even my magic." Jabez waved his hand and the image turned into something dark moving swiftly through the forest. "Good. Looks like he's already on his way. I wasn't sure if he would since he hadn't come for any of the others I've taken."

He slapped his hands together and the silver disc of liquid vanished. Then he turned to them with a dull expression on his handsome, yet alien-like, face.

Reia had a hard time looking past his horns, his long-pointed ears, and the striking black marks on the outside of him. The amount of muscle on him said he bore not a single ounce of fat, and he looked so remarkably strong she was sure he could snap her like a twig.

"What are you?" Reia rasped.

He was freely able to use magic. He'd freaking teleported her here! What else could he do?

His eyes crinkled with humour, his head lowering as he smirked. "A little bit of that, a little bit of this."

At her twisted face, her nose bunching up on one side, he threw his head back and bellowed out a deep laugh that echoed in the hollow, stone room.

The woman sighed, giving him a look of irritation like she was bored of his antics.

"Don't mind him. The Demon in him makes him a jerk."

"Yes, but the Elf in me makes me aware of how easy it is to get what I want when I'm cunning. I was hoping to play with her. It's fun to tease the humans. You're ruining my fun."

An elf? But I didn't think they were real. Reia's brows drew together in concentration as she tried to think back on the book the Witch Owl had given her. It had spoken of Elves,

but she hadn’t read too deeply on the passage of them. She’s disregarded it as rubbish.

A being that is similar to a human, but not human. Pointed ears, mostly dark skin with white hair, and can use magic. Usually slim and athletic.

The woman waved her hand at him.

“I’ll entertain you as much as you like later. After I get what I want.”

“Always after you get what you want,” he grumbled. “It better be good this time. I’m delivering the Mavka to you just like you demanded.”

Reia tried to remain alert and listen to their conversation, but she couldn’t help wondering what else was real if Elves were. She eyed him carefully. *If he didn’t have those ears, I probably wouldn’t have believed him. Does that mean there are half-humanoid horses roaming around like freaks?*

“You’re enjoying this either way, Jabez.” She tilted her head forward with her hands on her hips, looking up at him through her brows disapprovingly. “Don’t play coy.”

His lips curled knowingly.

He waved his hand dismissively at them.

“Whatever. I’m going to my servants to see if they brought me anything good to eat. You know me. Using my Elven magic makes me hungry.”

“Servants?” Reia squeaked.

“Yes. My castle is full of Demons. But don’t worry, they know not to harm any of the humans I bring into my castle. If you are going to be eaten, it’ll only be by me.” He waved his hand to the woman in front of her. “And she has told me that you are not going to be my meal.”

She waved to him as he walked away to leave, before turning to Reia who was frozen on the spot watching his back as he left.

I’ve got to get out of here. She didn’t know how to do that. *I doubt I can fight my way out.* She may want to, but she

also didn’t have death wish. *I may be reckless, but I’m not freaking stupid.*

Even without the show of his magic, which she knew he must've only scratched the surface of what he can do, Reia had seen his fangs and claws. He was tall, and the book said Elves were naturally fast. *Can’t fight someone bigger, stronger, and faster than me.*

It would be like fighting Orpheus, and she knew he’d kill her with one strike of his claws.

They want him. So is it better to play along with whatever they have planned until he gets here? She knew he would protect her, a scary shield, but until then, she was... a damsel. A damn damsel in distress and she wasn’t keen on playing this pathetic role. *I’m the bait.*

But the bait for what? She didn’t know their plans. Either way, she couldn’t leave, and she knew she would have to be the bait until he arrived so they could escape together.

Just play dumb, Reia. Which meant she had to go against her instincts to fight back. She was going to have to learn real fast how to bite her tongue. *Don’t get yourself killed or hurt before he even gets here.*

“I get that he is pretty in his own way,” the woman said with a bite to her tone. “But don’t think about getting ideas about offering yourself to him.”

Reia turned her head forward since she’d been staring at where he’d gone through a side door. With her narrowed gaze on Reia, she knew the woman thought she’d been staring at him with longing.

“He’s mine, and I won’t allow another human to take my place as his concubine.” Reia stiffened when she stepped forward to grab the ends of her hair, lifting them as though she was examining her. “If you do as your told, I’ll make sure you go home.”

“Don’t worry,” Reia said quickly with an assuring tone. “I’m not interested.”

Not even a little bit. Not even at all.

“You’ve been with Orpheus for over a month and a half. After experiencing something terrible like that, you deserve to at least your live your life the best you can.”

She stepped forward and forcibly threaded her arm through Reia’s. She stiffened, wanting to immediately recoil, but allowed her to start steering her away from the throne room through a large brown door on the other side.

At least she smells nice. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but the woman smelled heavily of a sweet perfume. The entire castle had its own sweet smell as well.

“All I’ve been doing is living in that house,” Reia retorted, resisting the urge to react.

What would happen if I smacked her for touching me? She couldn’t figure out why, but she really didn’t like this person even though she was apparently offering her freedom.

They’d stolen her and were now treating her like some poor, helpless, defenceless woman that was supposed to be fawning at them for their help.

“You don’t have to hide your shame. If you’ve survived this long, there can only be one reason why.”

Shame? What is there I need to be ashamed about?

Reia said nothing. She needed to stay quiet.

She bit down on the sides of her tongue to remind herself that she should keep her mouth shut, even if provoked.

She inspected the long, wide hallway she was being taken down. There were crimson red carpets on the ground with occasional decorative drapes hanging on the walls that hid the bare stone. Reia knew this place had many sections and towers when she’d seen it from afar. It had multiple towers surrounding its box-like shape, and she had no idea which direction this woman was leading her.

Although this was a grand castle, it was also unimpressive and barren. Everything felt cold. The carpeted flooring, even the walls as if they themselves emitted a chill. The very air was cold, as if nothing was alive inside it despite there obviously being creatures living here.

She could tell someone had attempted to decorate it, but it was sparse. Bronze candle arbours hanging on the walls were lit, but they only brought light, not a welcoming, warming glow.

“It smells like the Demon village here,” Reia commented, smelling that similar sweet aroma.

“Ah, yes,” the woman chuckled, her ankle bangles clinking together with each footfall. “We did see that Orpheus took you there. Jabez has used the same cloaking spell from there, here. It helps to keep those inside sane. They may be superior Demons to most, but they still have little self-control if they smell blood or fear.”

She kept her eyes on the hallways and the different turns they made in case she needed to make her way back to the throne room by herself. More so that she could run back if she discovered Orpheus had come so he could get her the hell out of here.

I miss my home. This cold, barren castle could never compare to her small, but cosy, cabin.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To a bath. I’m sure you want to wash off the spell he placed on you, and, you know... everything else.”

Why does she know so much about him? She even knew about the scent cloaking spell. She didn’t know what she meant by everything else.

Just as she was about to ask who she was, she was led into a large sleeping chamber. It was almost as wide as the living and kitchen area in her cabin, and it housed a bed with a frame canopy, multiple dressers, two chairs sitting in front of a coffee table, and a mirrored vanity table with a cushioned stool.

Everything was mismatched, like it had all been found or stolen and shoved into this room to make it appear lived in. There was a small film of dust on most of the surfaces, telling her it was mostly unused.

She took her to a room in the back that had a white ceramic clawfoot tub. Other than a singular vial of liquid soap, there was nothing else in the room, not even a towel.

“I had this prepared for you when I knew Jabez had grabbed you safely.” She gestured to the water. “It should still be warm. I will find you a towel.”

She turned to leave, and Reia watched her. Then she eyed the tub with water that was steaming.

Why is she being so kind to me? A bath, really? *Do I stink or something?* She lifted her arm to sniff her skin. Then again, she’d had it prepared before Reia even arrived. *It’s like she wants me to wash off the evidence of Orpheus.*

She crinkled her eyes at it in dismay. *I don’t want to.*

Despite her apprehension, Reia undid the ties at the back of her dress and slid it down her body. *Just do what you’re told.* Then she kicked off her shoes while untying the sides of her underwear before slipping inside the water.

The room was bright because it was lit with a crystal chandelier that housed many candles. It felt unnatural sitting naked in a bathtub with so much light, her eyes wanted the dimness she was accustomed to.

The woman appeared moments later with a towel and placed it on the ground next to the tub.

“Here, I’ll get rid of this for you.”

She bent over to pick up Reia’s dress by pinching it, like it was a disgusting thing, and Reia shot forward while reaching her hand out over the rim.

“Hey!” she exclaimed. “You can’t take that.”

“Don’t worry,” she laughed warmly, her lips pouting with humour. “I’ll bring you something nicer to wear.”

“No,” she rebutted. “I would prefer to wear it.”

Her smile suddenly fell, and she unfurled the bundle in her arms to hold her dress up in the air by its short sleeves. She crinkled her nose at it as her lips twisted with disgust.

“But why? I have plenty of dresses that are made of the finest velvet, silk, or cotton you could wear. A lot of it is

stolen from the castle ruins back on the surface, or I've gotten the best Demon tailors to craft them – and they weren't easy to find since most of them suck at creating anything human."

Reia's cheekbones warmed.

"Because I made it."

And because Orpheus had given her the materials to do so. She had a light blue one she was halfway through making that was nearly the same, but she liked this one.

"I was wondering why you suddenly weren't wearing the white dresses or the ones you tried to dye with food." She looked over the dress once more, her face of disinterest still present. "Well, if you want to wear it that much, I'll lay it on the bed so it doesn't get dirty."

That's right, they said they couldn't see inside. That meant they didn't actually know what they'd been up to. Relief sailed through her, thankful they wouldn't have been able to see the private and intimate moments of her and Orpheus being together.

It was theirs, and nobody, especially not these people, deserved to see them.

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Reia made sure her bath was long, wanting to be away from this strange woman as much as possible.

The less time she spent with her, the less likely they'd discover that Reia was planning to escape. She had questions, but if she was too eager, she worried it would reveal that she cared for Orpheus.

Will they question why I want to know their plans?

She placed her hands over the sides of her head, digging her fingertips in. *Why is this even happening?*

If they wanted to harm Orpheus, why not just do it at the cabin? It was obvious that the Demon King had power, so she didn't understand why they were going through the trouble of taking Reia. The woman had said it was to help her, but why help her at all?

He said he'd taken other humans from him. But they'd never said if they'd rescued them or killed them themselves.

Why harm Orpheus at all? Unless they didn't want to harm him and just wanted to take something from him. *Did he steal something from them?* She couldn't see him doing something like that.

They obviously like to torture him. Laughing at his pain, his loneliness, his grief at losing the offerings he'd probably

tried so hard to befriend, just like he had with Reia.

Orpheus told me the Demon King doesn't like Mavka because he can't control them. Was it so simple? Because of a tyrant not being able to make a creature submit to his will? *But it's the woman that wants him.*

Fuck. She dug her fingers in harder. *This is so messed up.*

After some time passed, Reia only left the water because it had chilled. She grabbed the towel and dried her body before wrapping it around herself.

Maybe I can sneak out of the castle and wait for Orpheus outside. Then there would be no need for him to face them.

She exited the washroom, hoping to find the room empty, only to see the woman sitting at the vanity table staring at herself in the mirror. She'd been brushing her already brushed hair while smiling at herself.

"Finally," she sighed, the brush thudding against the table as she placed it down. "I was beginning to think you'd drowned in there."

"Sorry, I was thinking."

"I understand. I'm sure you've got a lot to process." She turned to face her while remaining seated. "Just know that everything is fine now."

"Thanks," Reia answered as she walked towards her dress.

Is she really going to make me change in front of her?

She was just sitting there, sparing Reia no privacy.

She tilted her head expectantly, and Reia stemmed the desire to groan. She wasn't uncomfortable walking around naked in front of a Duskwalker, but the idea of being bare in front of a human *woman* was making her anxious.

"Like I said, you don't have to be ashamed."

Once again, that word *ashamed* was being brought up. It made Reia more insecure.

The woman was curvy, with large breasts and a very beautiful face. Reia wasn't comparing herself to her, but she couldn't help feeling as though this woman was doing just that, and obviously felt superior.

Shoulders slumping in defeat, she lowered the towel. Trying as best as she could to hide her breasts and squeeze her thighs together, she reached for her dress.

Reia didn't miss the disgusted twitch in the woman's upper lip, her eyes dark with an ugly emotion.

"I knew it."

Reia stopped reaching and instead faced the woman bare, refusing to show a single shred of bashfulness. There was nothing wrong with her body, and she wouldn't allow this woman to make her feel as though there was. Orpheus thought she was beautiful, and that was all that mattered.

"Knew what?" Reia snapped at her.

"You've had sex with Orpheus."

She felt her confidence crumble and turned her head down to look at her own stomach. *Shit, I didn't think she'd understand what they meant.*

She quickly grabbed her dress to shove it over her body.

The woman mistook Reia's body language of wanting to hide the wounds on her stomach because she rose to stand.

"Like I said, you don't have to be ashamed." She began to lift her dress, revealing her tied underwear, as well as her navel. Reia's eyes widened at what she saw. "I've been in your shoes."

There were five semi-moon scars on her stomach. Scars that mirrored the freshly healed wounds on her own lower belly.

"You..." Reia's knees nearly crumbled in shock, revolution, disgust. "Your..."

She's had sex with Orpheus. She's...

She lowered her dress. "My name is Katerina."

She's the fucking woman!

She couldn't believe this.

"He's told me of you," she blurted out.

Yeah, he'd told Reia of their story, but not her name nor the fact she was still alive!

Her lips turned into a cruel pout, her eyes crinkling with humour. “Of course, he has.”

“That was nearly two centuries ago!” She stumbled back a few steps. “How-how are you even still alive? You should be dead.”

Gesturing her hand towards the rest of the castle, she said, “Jabez has been keeping me alive with his magic. He’s handy when I need him. I kind of like him too. He’s a jerk, but he’s also quite pleasant to be around.” Then she shrugged, starting to pat and stroke the front of her dress to smooth it over her body and back into its proper place. “And I can’t possibly have sex with human men. He’s the only one who could even try to satisfy me, and even that sometimes isn’t always guaranteed.”

Questions. So many questions swirled around in her mind. She’d wanted to talk to her from the moment Orpheus had told her about Katerina. To ask her why she had done what she did, why Orpheus couldn’t win her affections. Why Reia had ended up in his cabin instead, slowly, but surely beginning to care for him when this woman couldn’t.

“You lived with Orpheus for five years. If you wanted eternal life, why didn’t stay with him?”

“Stay with Orpheus?” she scoffed, folding her arms across her chest. “Because he’s a Duskwalker. He stole me from my home, made me live in a cave.”

Unable to help herself from leaping to his defence, Reia retorted, “But he built you a house.”

“Because he wanted to keep me compliant!” She stomped her foot, her arms folding tighter over her large chest. Her shout made Reia recoil. She didn’t seem angry with Reia, but angry with Orpheus and was venting her frustration. “He gave me whatever I wanted because it meant his own gain. I was trapped in a damn house that was so small I could barely breathe, and I wasn’t going to go running through the Veil to escape like some idiot. I spent five years with that monster hoping for a way out.”

But he's not a monster. She'd thought that too at first, but then he'd shown her how sweet he was. *He wants to snuggle like a puppy with its master.* How could anyone think of Orpheus as a monster after spending an extended period of time with him?

"You know how it feels," she said beseechingly. "He changed our bodies for himself! Just so he could have sex with us, and we had to give it to him or else."

She was making it sound like... like Orpheus had forced himself on her, but he'd never done that to Reia.

And I asked him to do this to me. Sure, she didn't know *what* he would do, but she had wanted all of him, and he'd given it to her.

She'd never felt ashamed of it. Never regretted it. And a part of her enjoyed seeing his claw scars on her abdomen, the evidence that they were able to share moments of passion because of it.

"Did you tell him no?"

All Reia had needed to do was say that she was too tired, and his desire had turned into care. Instead, he'd curled around her to sleep, letting her rest in peace in his embrace throughout the night.

He hadn't even tried to touch her intimately in the morning during the bath after she'd woken. He'd fed her, made she sure drank water, asked her if she was well, and had even apologised for being too much.

"Tell him no?" She threw her hands forward while laughing, like what Reia had asked was absurd. "Did you? I didn't want to fucking die. All I have wanted is to live. Why would I do something so stupid? The last thing I wanted was to be fucking eaten by a damn horny Duskwalker."

Reia's lips curled into a smile. *So that's it. It wasn't because Orpheus was a monster. It was because she couldn't see past what he is to see him as anything else.*

This woman, Katerina, had never voiced her wants, had never denied Orpheus, simply because she was too blind to

see he would have stopped touching if she had just simply said no.

Orpheus had accepted male offerings because he didn't want to be alone. He wanted a companion, even if it was only a friend. He may have desired Reia, but it was her that initiated touch.

He was just trying to make her happy because he cared about her, and all she saw was a Duskwalker. Not the gentle, sweet, male creature that didn't want to be alone. Who was full of emotions and thought being intimate in any way was sharing themselves.

He'd told her he liked being connected to her because it made him feel they were closer to each other.

Katerina had thought Orpheus was just trying to make her compliant, giving her whatever she wanted just so he could obtain sexual release, when in reality he was doing it because he was wanted to satisfy her in any way he could.

She created her own nightmare.

Reia had met the Mavka who was a little stupid, and she could see Orpheus being like that with Katerina. Overtly curious and inquiring about her, discovering her in a way that might have appeared off-putting, but really had been inquisitive.

She could see it in her mind's eye. This woman had just sat there and let Orpheus be his curious self and had allowed it. He'd never seen a pussy or had sex before. If she'd smacked his hand away and told him no, like Reia had done to the Mavka who had become surprised, Orpheus would have backed down like the Mavka had as well.

They were so similar. Both lonely, both tender in their own way. The Mavka had wanted to protect Reia just as much as Orpheus had when going through the Demon village.

In some ways, she couldn't blame Katerina for what she'd done. She thought she was surviving, but she had never allowed herself to see Orpheus for who he really was. She

had *wanted* to see a mindless beast of a monster, and she'd made one.

"So, you escaped with a Demon instead?" Reia asked, unsure of why they were different to her.

He was just as much as a monster as Orpheus. Neither were human, and both would eat them within the blink of an eye.

"A Demon *King*," she added in. "Who lives in a castle, not some hut in the woods."

"But he eats humans too."

Katerina frowned, not seeming to understand what Reia was saying.

"Yes, but at least he has a face." She shuddered as if a shiver of revulsion swept through her. "And doesn't have ugly fur and gross fish fins. At least his dick is kind of normal. You've only had to stare at a skull for a month a half, but staring at it for five years was like facing the grim reaper. His face only means death."

And yet, it had brought Reia unfathomable pleasure. His tongue was a naughty, wicked sin and his wolfish face held an otherworldly beauty in it. She often got lost staring at him.

She adored the way he looked. His fur was unbelievably soft, his body so warm it forced her muscles to relax. His fins rose when he was aggressive, yes, but they also did it when he was moments from spending, showing her just how deeply he was reacting to it. They even quivered slightly.

"He *ruined* our bodies." Katerina's shoulders slumped. "Jabez is big, but even doing it with him is a struggle. Once you go back to living with humans and find someone you want to have sex with, you'll understand. You'll hate Orpheus even more when you discover just what he's taken from you."

"Yeah," Reia laughed. "I already figured a man's dick would be pointless to me now."

Katerina turned her head up to laugh at the ceiling humourlessly. “The only thing that made those five years bearable was that it at least *felt* good. I fucking hated it, but he always made me come, even if I didn’t want to.”

Reia was sure he did because he always paid extra attention in making sure she orgasmed. He almost seemed frenzied for it sometimes, like he needed her to more than getting his own release.

“I understand,” Reia said.

I understand you’re a spiteful fucking bitch who treated Orpheus like he was nothing more than a mindless animal. She hurt him because of her stupidity and prejudices. *And I hate you. I hate you so much for how much you hurt him.*

“Of course, you do,” she said, her stiff shoulders relaxing as she took her gaze away from the ceiling to smile at her. “I’ve brought you some food.” She gestured to the coffee table in the room. “It’s good. I’ve made sure the servants here learned how to make delicious food for me. It’ll be better than the boring vegetable meals you’ve been forced to eat because of him. It’s unfortunate that you’ve had suffer in my place.”

Reia walked over to the silver tray of food and raised her brow at it. It was a healthy serving of steak, drizzled in some sort of berry sauce, with mashed potatoes, onion, and mushroom.

I’ve made this, just with deer meat. Except maybe the butter, and her mouth did water for the taste of it.

“I can’t believe after all these years he’s still been trying to replace me,” Katerina laughed, grabbing Reia’s attention as she slowly began to pace. “It’s pathetic. He’s missed me and has been trying to find other humans to fill the gap so he can fornicate with them instead.” She crinkled her nose with distaste. “Actually, it’s a little gross. I’ve always wondered which humans he’s fucked and then eaten.”

“None,” Reia answered coldly. “I was the first.”

“Really?” she said with a beaming smile. “That’s excellent. So, he’s truly been suffering all these years.”

Her heart panged in her chest. *She hates him so much that she wanted him to suffer.* She felt so bad for him. He’d cared for someone who was undeniably cruel.

“I knew when you’d survived for so long that he must have been taking you. I couldn’t watch knowing you were going through what I did.”

“Thanks,” Reia said, the word tasting sour in her mouth.

“Of course. Now, once you eat, you should get some sleep. I’m sure you’re tired and would like to rest properly for the first time in ages.”

Reia’s eyes fell on the bed that looked awfully cold and lonely.

It wouldn’t smell of smoky mahogany and pine. It wouldn’t be warm. It wouldn’t have the soothing rhythm of a firm and large chest pulsing against her from strong breaths that echoed with the sounds of an even stronger heartbeat.

“It would be nice to have some alone time,” Reia answered, attempting to muster up a thankful smile that wouldn’t appear false and filled with contempt.

“Of course, you would. He follows you around like a lost mutt. I know how it feels to want some time to yourself.” Katerina flipped her long black hair over her shoulder like Reia had seen many vain women do, before heading towards the exit. “If you need anything, two servants will be waiting on the other side of the door. They won’t come inside though, so you don’t need to worry.”

Dammit. There went her plans for sneaking outside.

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Reia sat at a long banquet table, feeling ridiculous since there were at least twenty seats and only three of them were filled. The chairs were large, and her toes barely skimmed the ground as she sat upon her chair.

The walls were stone with more red drapes and a tapestry that rested against the wall behind the head chair. Two crystal chandeliers were unlit above them while two large candelabras sat on the table. The table was made of shiny polished oak with natural swirling patterns and had chairs that matched.

With her head lowered, she looked up at Katerina sitting opposite to her through her lashes. Jabez was seated at the head with his boots upon the table and leaning back.

Sleep had eluded her for most of the night. Tossing and turning, she hadn’t been able to stop thinking. She missed Orpheus, and her worry for him wouldn’t allow her to rest properly. She knew he must be distressed, knew he would be fretting.

She could almost imagine him whining as he ran here, and that made her heart hurt terribly.

She was tired as she sat with them, pushing food around her plate while trying to eat it. It was a nice breakfast of eggs and bacon.

It was more like a late brunch. The sun was bright against the windows, high in the sky, but the windows were blackened by some kind of swirling magic, preventing the Demons inside the castle from being burned by its light.

She wanted to eat. She hadn't had a normal fried breakfast like this since she'd started living with Orpheus, but her queasy stomach couldn't handle it.

Katerina and Jabez were talking to each other, being overly playful because he obviously demanded it even though Reia was sitting right there. She didn't like his wandering eye over her.

"I didn't think Elves were real," Reia commented, trying to redirect their conversation.

"Not in this world," he answered, folding his arms behind his head and stretching his half-naked body out which made his muscles flare. "I come from another world, just like all Demons."

"By using a portal to get here?"

Orpheus had mentioned a portal.

"That's right. We come from a land that is similar to this one, but filled with Elves and Demons. Elves are our food, but they are very quick, strong, and have magic. I am the product of a Demon and an Elf mating."

"If they are hunted for food, why would an Elf have sex with a Demon then?"

"Who said it was consensual?" he bit with a growl.

It seemed as though he wasn't happy about this, that his birthing was the product such a violent action.

"Like when they eat humans, Demons change. They grow smarter, stronger, and obtain strange desires, like acting similar to humans and Elves and mimicking them. As far as I know, I am the only hybrid." He lifted his hand and flicked his pointed ears. "I was hunted for what I was, because I am an abomination to the Elves. So, I escaped with the magic I had from birth, and I gained more from eating them until I was able to create a portal."

“And that portal led to here,” Reia finished for him, placing her fingers over her mouth in thought.

“Exactly.” He put his hand back behind his head. “And then I brought the Demons here so they could eat and we may one day go back and destroy the Elves.”

“You brought them here to make an army? Like for a war?”

He nodded, his lips thinning. His dark brown eyes seemed to wander as they dazed over.

“The Demons let me be a king because I can do things for them, make life easy for them, gave them a place where they can hunt freely. They are steadily growing smarter and stronger so that one day we can go back and kill the Elves.” His voice was laced with hate while he bared his Demon fangs with a sneer. She figured he despised the Elves for hunting him. “They were slowly dying from being hunted into extinction, I have allowed them to grow.”

“Have Elves been here then?”

He shrugged.

“If your kind know of them, then most likely, but that was probably before I created the portal and made the shade of the Veil.”

So, it’s all his fault we’ve lived in fear for almost three hundred years. She lowered her gaze to her food before he could see she was glaring.

“You made the Veil?”

“Took me many years to grow the trees, it wasn’t an easy task, but the sunlight has always burned them. The Demons needed a safe place to live. This canyon that spans one fourth of this world was the perfect place for my portal to appear in. I did make it a little bigger, though.”

Katerina remained quiet, seeming to understand why Reia was curious about this.

When I get out of here, should I go back to my kind and tell them all this? Maybe she and Orpheus could tell the world the truth so they could figure out a way to drive the

Demons back into their home world. Then the Elves could deal with them once more.

“I go back frequently so I can grow my magic by consuming more Elves. They are still too strong for me in their numbers.”

Something made his entire body twitch, and he lowered his hands so he could twirl them.

“Is something wrong?” Katerina asked him while lowering her eating utensils.

Eventually a smaller ball of liquid silver than the day before began to form. He threw it in the air, and it flattened in front of his face. Reia couldn’t see anything as the back of it reflected her own face like a mirror.

“The Mavka has entered my territory. He will be here shortly.”

The dark smirk on Katerina’s face was instant, and it made Reia’s hackles rise. A deep breath of tension left her, sighing out of her heavily. *He’s almost here.*

“So… you said I was a pawn,” she started, eyeing them both warily. Reia needed her answers, needed to plan for when Orpheus arrived. “What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing.” Katerina waved her hand up and down at her dismissively. “I can do the rest by myself. I just needed to bring you here so he’d follow. He probably thinks he can take you back, but don’t worry, we won’t let him. You’re perfectly safe.”

Reia frowned, lowering her own utensils when they both started to rise like they wanted to get moving. She was thankful this uncomfortable meal had ended.

“Then what are you going to do to him?” she asked when they were starting to walk out of the massive, but mostly barren, dining room.

“I’m going to kill him,” Katerina said with glee, almost skipping down the hallway they had entered.

Her face paled as a spike of dread sent a cold rush through her entire body. So cold, in fact, that her skin rose

with goosebumps. It froze her on the spot.

“What?” she almost squeaked out, before clearing her throat. “You’re planning to kill him?”

Jabez pushed her back to shove her forward so she’d keep walking.

“Took us a long time to figure out how to kill him,” Jabez said as he led them into the throne room. “Mavka are extremely hard to kill. She’s been lying to you, by the way. The only reason she saved you is because it was only recently that we learned how to kill them. Any human could have been in your shoes.” He tapped behind his ears when they were standing in the middle of the throne room, as if this was where they were planning on committing this villainous crime. “I like to listen in on everything in my castle, even when I’m not present.”

Katerina’s lips thinned in irritation, placing her hands on her hips as she gave him a glare. She didn’t deny it.

“You can’t stab them, that only enrages them,” he continued, coming forward to put his arm around Katerina’s shoulders. His pointed ears flickered in annoyance when a few strands of his hair tickled over them. “Stabbing them in the heart doesn’t work, and it’s near impossible to break through their outer ribcage. Cutting off their head doesn’t work either. You can’t even scoop out their brains. Within a day, no matter how large or small the wound is, even if the skull is without a body, they grow back.”

Katerina shuddered under his arm.

“So unnatural. At least if I cut off your head, you’d die.”

“Got to get to it first,” he chuckled, swiping his entire hand across her face like he was attempting to pet it. “It took me many tries with the ram-horned Mavka I caught recently. No matter what I did, he just wouldn’t die.”

I don’t know the ram-horned Duskwalker. But it didn’t matter, they’d *tortured* one. A creature with feelings and sentient thoughts. Both Orpheus and the Mavka had already

shown Reia they didn’t like pain, and yet they had gone out of their way to hurt one just to discover how to kill them.

“Then, how?” Reia asked, eyeing the room with uncertainty. How were they planning to kill him?

She frowned when she saw her sword still lying on the ground. Yeah, that was *not* an endeavour she saw working out for her. Like a dog with a stick tied to its neck and piece of meat hanging off the other end, she knew she’d never reach it, no matter how hard she tried.

He leaned up and tapped his knuckles against the top of his head.

“I didn’t get the chance to try because the Witch Owl stole him from me – she’s a pesky little thing, always getting in the way. But, when I mentioned breaking his skull, his eyes turned white for the first time. That’s when I realised that if I cut off anything, it didn’t matter if their skull was still intact.”

I will crack your skull. Orpheus had threatened those words to the Mavka. *I will shatter it.* He’d threatened to kill him, and he’s eyes had gone white with fear.

What they were saying was true, and now she knew what they were planning to do.

Her gaze turned to Katerina who had a scheming look upon her grinning face, her teeth bared to show how large it was.

She hated Orpheus so much she wanted to kill him, and with the Demon King helping her, Reia didn’t see how he’d survive.

Shit, Orpheus. Turn back.

She had wanted him to come here and bring her home, but now that she knew they were planning to kill him, that they knew how to, dread settled in her gut like a heavy weighted ball. Her heart started racing in her veins, wondering how the hell they were supposed to survive this.

I can’t fight Jabez, he’d kill me within a second.

There would be nothing Reia could do to help if she didn’t want to die as well.

Jabez narrowed his eyes and pulled away from Katerina. His head tilted to the side when he stepped towards her.

“You have not smelt of fear from the moment I brought you here,” he said, twisting his head the other way as he examined Reia, who began backing up. “Why do you suddenly smell of it at the mention of his death?”

Oh, shit. Reia halted and lifted her chin up at him.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You can pretend, human, but you cannot hide it from me.” He started smacking his lips, licking across them with a wet tongue. “The Demons won’t be able to smell it, but I am the conjurer of the aroma spell and even if it isn’t strong, it doesn’t hide the scent of fear wafting from you now.”

She said nothing, staring up at him with her hands slowly clenching.

No matter how hard she tried to push down her emotions, her worry for Orpheus was too strong. She hadn’t feared for herself, but she feared for him.

He doesn’t deserve this.

“Reia?” Katerina asked softly, her dark brows creasing.

Reia turned her gaze to her instead, her teeth clenching so tightly she knew her jaw muscle had knotted. Her chest pumped in and out heavily but steadily.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about,” Reia said with a sneer in her voice. “I’m not afraid because of Orpheus dying. Why should I care? You know what he’s done.”

Katerina’s eyes darked as her lips thinned.

“Then why are you suddenly afraid?” Her tone was deep, like a warning to watch how she answered.

She couldn’t say she was suddenly afraid of being here, that would be too obvious.

“I’m worried I’ll get hurt in the process.”

Katerina’s features softened in understanding, but Jabez twisted his head once more.

“She’s lying. Her heart rate is spiking.”

His ears flickered like he was listening intently to Reia and what was happening beneath her skin.

Katerina’s face hardened once more.

“You don’t care for him, do you?”

“No,” Reia quickly answered, staring her in the eyes.

“That would be good,” Katerina laughed, her eyelids crinkling. “If it was true. You care for him. *Him,* a Duskwalker.” Her lips began to twist horribly, smearing her pretty face into something truly horrendous, her blue eyes turning icy. “You didn’t actually *want* to have sex with him, did you?”

Welp! Cat’s out of the bag, I guess. There was no point in pretending anymore.

Reia’s lips curled brightly into a mocking smile.

“Sure, I did.” Then she placed her hand against her chin to tap at it with a forefinger. “Actually, I’m almost certain I *begged* for his cock the first time, tentacles and all.”

Disgust marred her face, and Reia chuckled.

She raised her arms to the side to present herself.

“So, what’s going to happen to me now?”

“You will die,” Jabez said, stepping for her with the claws of his right hand raising.

She immediately twisted her head to him with a glare.

“No,” Katerina cut in as she grabbed him by the arm. “It’ll be more fun if she gets to watch him die first. If you like him so much, you can see me kill him for lying to me, letting me think you understood how I felt. I tried to *save* you.”

“It’s only saving someone if they wanted to be taken away.” She nodded her head towards Jabez. “And he’s already told me that you only brought me here to use me in getting Orpheus here. You’re nothing but a selfish bitch.”

She headed for Reia herself, who stood there without backing down. Katerina slapped her, making her head snap

to the side.

She hissed in a breath. *Well, that hurt a whole bunch.* The entire left side of her face was stinging.

Katerina then reached up and grabbed Reia's jaw, squishing her cheeks in with her fingers as she yanked her face closer, until they were almost nose-to-nose.

"Don't think because you like him that you're special. You're nothing but my poor replacement. He has always longed for me, wanted me. He's mine, he's always been mine."

Clenching her teeth, her lips twisted with a scowl as she let Katerina grip her like this. It's not like there was anything she could do in return, and if she tried, she'd probably just anger them. As long as she was still alive, there was a chance they could escape, no matter how slim.

Anger soared, but so did intense jealousy. Reia had accepted him, he was *hers*.

Katerina had sex with Orpheus, was the first female he'd ever touched, and envy like she'd never known flared like a wildfire in her gut. This woman didn't appreciate it, but Reia did, would have, and she hated that Katerina had touched him at all.

She'd felt jealous the day he'd told her he'd been with another woman after she'd stroked him to release for the first time. She'd been upset then, and she hadn't even known that the woman had been this bitch who was beautiful on the outside, but remarkably *ugly* on the inside.

Katerina had given him a name and Reia wished it had been her instead. She wouldn't change it, but she wished it had been her that had done it, that she was the first human he found. That he hadn't had to go through all his pain and suffering because of a heinous cow.

She could feign niceness, but she'd treated Orpheus horribly. Reia found that unforgiveable.

"That would be good," Reia said, saying her words back to her. "If it were the truth. Orpheus is *mine.* He is coming here

for *me*.”

“Is that what you think?” she laughed, letting her go by throwing her head back. “He probably thinks you’ve come here willingly, like I did. You think if he was given the choice, he’d pick you over me?”

Without a single shred of doubt, Reia said, “Yes.”

“Then you’re going to get your heart broken by nothing but a filthy Duskwalker.” Her smile was cruel as she folded her arms and lifted her nose up at her. “Not only am I going to make you watch me kill him, but you’re going find out your *wrong.*”

“Then your face of defeat will be even funnier when you discover I’m right,” Reia retorted.

Jabez twitched all over again.

“He’s entered the castle grounds, Katerina.” His grin said he was truly entertained by watching the women fighting in front of him. Then he conjured a dagger to give to her. “What do you want me to do with her?”

Katerina spun away from them to head down the throne steps to stand in the middle. She stood facing the closed brown, timber double doors on the other side that were so tall a 12ft troll could have fit through them.

“Cloak yourselves and make her watch.”

With a nod, he reached for Reia who stepped away. She pointed her finger at him.

“Don’t touch me, freak.”

Cocking a brow, his grin grew. Then he disappeared only to materialise behind her a second later. He grabbed her and wrapped an arm around her torso to clamp her arms to her sides while placing his clawed hand around her jaw and neck.

A mist-like sheen surrounded them like a bubble as he dragged her to the side.

“She’ll be so excited with me later after all this.”

“You seem to like her a lot,” Reia sneered, wriggling in his grip but unable to get out of it.

“She is useful. Humans are better at sex than Demons.”

Oh, come on. Ew! That meant he’d been bedding Demons at some point. Then again, he was hybrid of them. She shouldn’t be so surprised.

“Why are you even helping her?” Reia asked, staring at Katerina who tucked the dagger into the sleeve of her dress to hide it before clasping her hands in front of her hips to wait.

“Because she has demanded this since the moment I took her.” He slipped his hand higher to force her jaw shut by pressing up. “And I don’t like Mavka because they will not join me. They are incredibly strong. Stronger than Demons, yet they will not help me. They even try to fight me if they find me in their territory, though I created the home in which they lurk. They kill my people, eat Demons, the army I am trying to grow. They must be eradicated, and her Mavka will be the first.”

He pressed his nose against her cheek with a chuckle.

“This will happen, human. You can scream and cry for him, but he will not be able to hear you under my cloak, nor will he be able to smell you or see you. Then, after she kills him, I will eat you, and she will enjoy watching me do it.”

Her lips twitched with disdain, growing tight as she pursed them.

“But I wish to hear what will be said with clarity so stay quiet.”

Then he covered her mouth, almost blocking her nose as well, making it difficult to breathe under his large hand.

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Orpheus sprinted on all fours through the Demon King’s lands, rushing past the many unkempt hedges that appeared as though they had never been pruned. Trees, so tall that not even Orpheus could jump to the lowest branch, were situated within the stone fence walls of the castle grounds, alongside thorny, black-coloured rose shrubs. He dodged all the overgrown flora, feeling the burn in his muscles from running.

His breaths snorted out in loud huffs through his mouth, too strong and sharp to be blown through his nose hole, as his tongue constantly darted forward to help on each exhale.

He’d not rested on his way here, did not stop or slow, even for a second. His bones and joints ached, his torso was tight with exertion, but determination gave him strength.

He could fight, would fight, if it meant he had Reia back in his arms.

His head darted around to all the Demons who shrunk upon seeing him and his reddened glowing orbs.

Following the dirt path, he came to the castle’s grand steps and ran up them. The two Demons keeping guard hissed and screeched before darting off the sides of the stairs to flee him.

As soon as he was in front of the large arching wooden doors, he stabbed his claws into them as he pushed their heavy weight open. He was shoving his body through before they were even halfway open to enter the entrance hall.

He slid across the wide strip of carpet that was placed down over the cold stone floor as he stopped. Nobody had greeted him in the dimly lit hall. It was barren of furniture besides two long drawer cupboards with lit candles on top of them next to the doors he'd just entered from. Stepping in a slow circle, he lifted his snout into the air, sniffing to see if he could find a trace of Reia's scent.

The strong sweet-smelling aroma violated his senses, not allowing him to know if he was coming here to find she was already dead. A whine escaped him at that thought.

His head shot to the side, at the door at the end of the hallway that he knew led to the grand hall before it turned into the throne room that backed it. Her scent was faint, but it was coming from that direction.

His eyes whitened. He was afraid to go that way.

Not because of the Demon King who could possibly be sitting inside it, but because the last time he'd entered that room he'd faced Katerina two centuries ago.

Two hundred years ago he'd entered that very room to find her sitting on his lap, telling Orpheus to leave and that she hated him. That she didn't want to be by his side.

He feared he would be greeted with the same scene.

Reia is not Katerina.

He pushed forward slowly, warily, hesitantly, on all fours in his morphed form to make his way across the entrance room.

He lifted a hand and opened the double doors.

Reia's scent was strong in here, like she'd only moments before been inside it, but he knew upon first glance she wasn't there. Neither was the Demon King.

Instead, his gaze fell on Katerina who was standing alone at the top of the throne podium's steps.

In his crouched position, one of his hands pressed against the ground stepped backwards as if the urge to retreat pushed him back. Her hair was as black as he remembered it, her skin still shiny with that light glow in it like it'd been darkened by the sun. Her blue eyes, that had always appeared like frost, were still as cold as ever.

And yet she smiled to him, her wide, puffy lips curling.

Orpheus tilted his head. He couldn't remember if she'd ever smiled at *him* before.

He looked around while forcing himself to step forward.

He needed to know Reia was alive, that she was safe, and find out where she was so he could take her home. He needed her to be sheltered once more in the safety of his salt circle, his trinkets, by his body as they lie on top of the furs because she told him he made being under them too hot when they cuddled.

"Orpheus," she greeted almost warmly.

Her smile deepened to the point her eyes crinkled the corner of her eyelids.

His head lowered as he shrunk under the power of her soft voice. He was approaching her, but he didn't know if he should. *She will know where she is.* She had to know where the Demon King would have taken her.

The fact he wasn't here with her while they must have known Orpheus was approaching, and was now inside the castle, worried him.

Where is Jabez? he thought, crawling his way up the stairs to stand in front of Katerina while keeping himself low.

The smell of the perfume she wore did little to hide her cinnamon spice and sage scent from him, as well as the smell of the metal placed over her. She'd always liked the pretty things the humans wore. She'd demanded lots of it when she'd been with him and he'd taken her to the village.

The only thing that eased him was that he could smell Reia had been here recently, which meant she was still alive.

It had taken him nearly a full night and day getting here, and his muscles, although still tense and very much aching, relaxed just a little at the knowledge that she might be safe.

“Where is Reia?” he asked her slowly.

Katerina’s smile dropped instantly, and her eyes narrowed as her lips tightened. He’d always fretted when she looked angered.

“She is gone, Orpheus.”

He noticed her hands curl like she wanted to fist them, but stopped herself.

“But I can smell she was just here.”

He crossed his hand in front of the other, stepping to the side and in the direction Reia’s scent smelt the freshest. He wanted to follow it, knowing at the end of that trail would be his little doe.

“She is with the Demon King.”

She followed his step, standing in front of him as though to stop him from moving forward. A chill ran down his spine at her words, making his fur ruffle and his fins lift.

“Is he hurting her?”

He noticed Katerina took in a deep breath through her nose and closed her eyes for a moment, before releasing it and opening them once more. Her face gentled, the barest smile present.

“She has taken my place.”

She raised her hand as though she intended to cup his snout.

He backed up, unsure why she was reaching for him when she never had before. She was being... different.

“Taken your place?”

He tried to step around her again, his sight darting in the direction he wished to go – not that she would be able to notice him doing so.

“I was tricked, Orpheus.” She gave him a face of pain, the corners of her eyelids crinkling as her lips parted. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to leave you. I can come back to you now.”

His eyes turned a dark yellow in curiosity. *She didn't mean to leave me?*

"But you told me you did not want to be by my side, Katerina."

Spirit of the void help him, he had not said her name in eons. He hadn't even braved uttering it to Reia.

"I had to," she quickly said, reaching again and managing to cup his snout, holding it with undeniable with care. "He forced me to, said I had to. He tricked me into having to be with him and abandon you, or else I die."

His heart ached. Orpheus had always wanted this, had always *longed* for this. For Katerina to come back to him, to want him as he always did her. To be in his embrace in the home he built for her, decorated for her, spent his time creating a place she would be comfortable and happy in.

Everything he had done, he'd done for *her*.

"But why now?" Why was this happening now, when he had finally found a human that wanted to be with him?

He felt torn between his past and his present. Katerina was not Reia, and Reia was not Katerina. They were different, but they were important to him.

He'd been with her for five years, and Orpheus had cared deeply about her. For those few short years, Katerina had been his everything. His friend, his lover, his warmth, his light, the person who fought against his loneliness and made him feel undeniably whole.

She had been his bride, even though she hadn't given him her soul.

He hadn't minded her wanting and taking from him, because Orpheus had wanted to give. Her smiles, even though had never been directed at him, had been his goal, and they brought him pleasure in a way that didn't touch his body, but his soul instead, his heart.

And yet, her touch now felt foreign to him. Her hands were just as soft and warm as Reia's, they felt the same against

the bone of his skull, but it forced the waft of her scent into nostrils.

Her spicy scent wasn't gentle like that of elderberries and red roses.

"Reia offered to take my place so that I don't have to be with him anymore. She's very nice." Katerina gave him another smile. "She said that if I wanted to be back with you so much, that she would be with Jabez."

Orpheus felt his heart sinking so deep it was like it was moving through his chest to sit painfully in his stomach.

She offered herself to Jabez? He felt the familiar crawl of betrayal beneath his flesh, but it was much worse than what Katerina had done this to him.

He didn't want to believe this, that Reia would leave him. *She said she wanted to stay with me.*

A quiet whine rattled his lungs.

"Where is Reia, Katerina?" he asked, wanting to talk to her, to speak with her, for her to tell him herself so he could remember the truth of this just as painfully as he had with Katerina.

It would help him turn away. It would help him leave.

Her eyes suddenly narrowed while her lips thinned tightly.

"Forget about her," she demanded, pulling his head forward when it was obvious he was trying to search for her. "She is not going with you." Then she reached for one of his horns to grab a bell dangling from it. "Did she make this for you? How tacky."

Katerina yanked it, ripping it from his horn so she could stare down at it in her palm.

"She put bells on you like a cat."

Orpheus' sight glowed to red, and he stepped back sharply from her as a light growl emitted from his chest. *She broke my gift!* Reia had told him she would be upset if he lost or broke them!

This was something the old Katerina would have done, something so careless and self-centred. Orpheus liked his

bells, he wanted to wear them. Yet, if she didn't like something, she would make sure he knew of it.

But in her touching them, making them ring, she reminded Orpheus that Reia had made them. Katerina had never given him anything but her body, and she told him when she went with the Demon King that she'd hated it and every moment with him.

Her face had been filled with a glare, the same glare she'd worn while being with him often.

Orpheus didn't trust her anymore.

Katerina had hurt him irreparably, whether that was by unwillingness or not. He trusted Reia, refused to believe she would be with the Demon King after everything they'd shared.

She hadn't needed to give her body to Orpheus, but instead *she* had wanted to. She had wanted to cuddle with him, read to him, give him gifts, and sweet little kisses against his skull.

"Where is she?" Orpheus growled.

"I'm telling you that I want to go with you," Katerina said, her brows creasing so deeply that her forehead began to crinkle. "I told you where she is. She is with the Demon King. Why do you keep asking about her when you have me?"

"Because I don't want you." He turned away from her to go after the woman who smelled like the sweetest garden. "I want to find Reia."

"You will regret that, Orpheus," she said with a dark tone.

He didn't care. He didn't even bother to turn back and look at her, not when his brave little human was currently somewhere in this castle, possibly in danger.

Reia suddenly appeared out of thin air.

His heart warmed just at seeing her. She was running to him.

Actually, she was sprinting, and she looked *angry*.

She looked so angry, in fact, her eyes filled with hate and spite in his direction, that the warmth he felt suddenly left him. Had he been mistaken? Had Katerina been telling him the truth, and he'd mistakenly chosen the wrong path?

But he didn't want Katerina anymore.

Even if it meant he was alone, he didn't want the woman who had made him feel hollow all these eons. The person that, when he looked back in his memories after hearing the words of her forsaking him for another, had never looked at him pleasantly.

He wanted this woman, the one sprinting towards him like she was about to fearlessly fight him with spite in her eyes.

Orpheus retreated a step and slunk lower in worry.

Showing her he was surrendering, *submitting*, his eyes going white, he watched her approach. *Perhaps she is just angry with me because she was taken.* He was hoping she would just scold him and wasn't here to say she hated him too.

She ran past him.

He turned just in time to see Reia tackle Katerina who had been holding a dagger above his head while he was looking away. It clanked against the stone ground, ringing in the echoey room.

He shuffled back in surprise. *She was going to attack me?*

And it looked as though she'd been aiming straight for his skull – a blow that would have killed him had she managed to pierce his skull and crack it.

Katerina screeched in surprise before she hit the ground with Reia on top of her, who then reached her arm back and proceeded to punch her in the face as she straddled her waist.

"What the hell, Jabez!?" Katerina yelled, trying to fight Reia by reaching to grab her arms. "You were supposed to hold onto her!"

Orpheus turned his head to the smell of the Demon King scent that suddenly pierced the air of the room. He was

holding his groin, his teeth bared as if he was hissing in a breath.

“She bit my hand and punched me in the fucking seam!”

Orpheus knew how much being hit in the seam hurt. It radiated pain through his cock, the sac that was embedded at the base, and all the way through his groin. No wonder he’d let go of Reia. Orpheus doubted he’d be able to hold onto anything if he was dealt with such extreme agony.

But Reia was in danger, being rolled over so that Katerina could be above her instead. He spun to them to help.

She protected me. Hope soared within him. Katerina had lied, Reia didn’t want to be here.

Jabez materialised in front of him before he could even take a step.

“Where do you think you’re going, Mavka?”

Orpheus roared and leaped forward, tackling the biggest threat to the ground. *He stole her.* The Demon King had taken his female from him, and currently he was a danger to them both.

When they hit the ground, before Orpheus could lower his claws that he’d raised to strike, Jabez disappeared. He slashed the stone instead.

He looked behind him to where his scent reappeared and ran in that direction. Jabez disappeared before he could reach him.

Materialising behind him, he wound his arms around Orpheus’ neck and grabbed a horn and started pulling his head to the side.

“I know how to kill you now,” he chuckled, making his head turn as he pulled harder. “That skull of yours will be nice when it’s broken into pieces.”

Orpheus’ neck twisted as he rotated his head on his neck, turning, and turning, and turning until he was facing Jabez behind him. Like an owl, he could turn his head almost three-sixty degrees. With a snarl, he launched it forward and bit into his shoulder.

Sweet because of the Elven in his blood, but also putrid because of the Demon in him, his reddish-purple blood slipped into Orpheus' mouth. His eyes had long ago turned crimson, and they deepened as anger and hunger took focus.

Jabez winced before disappearing to escape Orpheus' fangs.

"Jabez!" Katerina screamed with her hand held up to the side.

Reia had grabbed her sword and was now running towards Katerina with the intention of swinging it. A sword appeared in her hand just in time for her to deflect Reia's blow.

Orpheus was launched across the room when a fist landed against his cheekbone because he'd been distracted. Pain shot through him, his neck crumbling sideways due to the strike, and he hit the ground with a deep crunching thud.

There was nothing that could keep him down as he spun back to his four limbs, roaring once more as he sprinted for Jabez.

He disappeared just as he tried to slash him with his claws. Orpheus laid down on his stomach when he reappeared beside him to miss the fist that was sailing through the air to hit him.

While still being low, he pushed himself forward and bit into Jabez's ankle.

He pulled back, tripping him over as Orpheus stood up. Shaking his head, he clamped his jaw down to dig his fangs deeper. Jabez roared in pain, moving slightly side-to-side on his back from Orpheus' ferocious head shake.

Their fight was evenly matched despite Orpheus being faster and stronger than the Demon King. His ability to teleport at will, even when captured, put him at an advantage.

They both could have their heads ripped off, but Orpheus could continue to fight if his heart or body was pierced,

whereas Jabez would require retreating. If Jabez's head was torn from him, he would die, but Orpheus' could grow back.

However, now that he knew the Demon King had learned how to kill Mavka, he was sure he would break his skull if he removed it from his body this time – since Orpheus had his head removed by him in the past only to reform his body a day later where his skull rested.

Neither could land a debilitating blow. Jabez's claws gouged into Orpheus' chest in a deep and long strike, but Orpheus did the same to his back. Jabez dug his claws into his neck, but Orpheus turned his head and bit into his arm before he could rip his throat out.

The sounds of swords clung rang in the background, and he'd seen peeks of Reia and Katerina fighting with each other. Their movements were slow in comparison to Orpheus and Jabez fighting, who were swift and short with their attacks, dodging and disappearing in flashes.

Orpheus couldn't focus on them, he needed to face his own opponent, but he'd seen Katerina was constantly on the back foot. The Witch Owl's training book had given Reia the skills to fight against her with ease.

"I'm going rip your head off, Mavka," the Demon King sneered, baring his fangs with a growing grin. "Then I'm going to let Katerina stab it with her dagger, and I'm going to fuck her with your dead skull mounted on the wall above my bed so your hollow eyes can watch us."

He laughed as Orpheus launched, jumping in the air so he could come down on top of him with his claws already in motion to strike when he landed. He disappeared before Orpheus could reach him and appeared to the left.

Orpheus ran that way, chasing after his constantly escaping prey.

"But first, I'm going to tie your little human down so I can start from her toes as I eat her." He didn't reach Jabez in time before his body faded. His voice rang from behind, and he spun to it when he started to speak once more. "She'll

scream as she feels every bite. I wonder where I'll get to on her body before she bleeds out and dies."

"You will not touch her!" Orpheus bellowed, then had to back up when he was suddenly in front of him. He ducked his head back before Jabez could grab it, shooting forward to bite – only to chomp around air.

Ducking forward when his scent came from behind Orpheus, he missed his horn being grabbed, but claws came down across the back of his shoulder. He stifled his yelp, turning around to find he was gone.

Jabez couldn't get a hold of him because he could constantly smell him, and Orpheus couldn't get close enough to him without him disappearing. It was a game of chase for both of them, neither really getting the upper hand.

They had played this battle before, many times in fact, and it never ended in defeat or success.

He needed to get Reia and run before something happened to her. She couldn't survive a fatal injury like he could. *Her life is precious.* Her skin was beautiful, and he didn't want to see a mark on it that wasn't already there.

"Katerina!" Jabez roared, appearing near Orpheus, but not facing him.

His sight turned to where he was looking, only to find Reia had shoved her sword through Katerina's chest. The blade was sticking out her back, going all the way through her as red blood dripped down it.

She was under her, and she only stood when Katerina began to sag to her knees with blood dripping from her mouth. She yanked the sword to pull it from her slowly.

Orpheus didn't wait, not when the Demon King's sight was on her.

He sprinted and tackled Reia, shielding her with his body before Jabez could do anything. Her sword cut into his side, but he didn't care, not when she was in danger. Nothing else mattered. He was thankful the scent cloaking spell was in

place so he didn’t fall upon Katerina’s dying corpse instead of protecting Reia.

Letting her go so he could be on his hands and paws above her, he stared at Jabez whose face was slowly turning to rage.

“We are leaving,” Orpheus told his quaking form. “We can fight, but neither will win. It has always been this way.”

He curled his arms around her torso, lifting her slowly so he could start backing away towards the exit while dragging her with him.

Dropping her when he disappeared, Orpheus lifted his hands, knowing exactly where and what he was going to do. He tried to grab Reia and instead he grabbed him by the hands when he materialised. Their fingers interlaced and they both pushed against each other’s strength.

“I will protect her, and I will not let you kill me so you can hurt her.”

He shot his head forward, bashing Jabez in the nose with the forehead of his skull. A crack sounded, and Jabez recoiled. He was gone, materialising off to the side to put space between them.

Once more, Orpheus lifted Reia to his chest with one arm, who clung to the fur there, and dragged her on her front as he slowly walked backwards.

“Thank you for coming for me,” she whispered, making his heart squeeze with a tender emotion.

She wanted me to come. That meant more to him than she would ever know.

“Your human killed mine,” Jabez said, reaching down to pick something off the ground. His back was to them, making it difficult to see what he’d retrieved. “Even if I cannot get to you, you will know how that feels.”

His muscles tensed, expecting Jabez to teleport in front of them. Releasing Reia, he readied himself.

Jabez turned swiftly and threw something across the distance.

She gave a horrible gasp just as a wet *shalunk* sounded.

Her fingers clutched his fur so tightly it hurt as the fibres pulled on his thick flesh, and he turned his head down to see she was facing up. Her expression was one of pain.

“Reia?” he asked, his hand coming up so he could cup the back of her head.

Something jutting from her back stopped him from finishing his movement and he leaned backwards so he could see.

It felt like the many times he’d jumped headfirst into a cold stream, chilling his body before he was even submerged, when he saw the handle of the dagger Katerina had planned to stab him with sticking out of her.

It was coming from between her shoulder blades, and his heart constricted painfully in his chest. *No...*

Before he even had the time to register this, Jabez was in front of them, using Orpheus’ distraction to attack.

He threw his hand up uselessly, knowing it would do nothing to stop whatever he was about to do as he clung to Reia with his other arm. He was unwilling to let her trembling form go. Orpheus didn’t want to deal with him, not when he could feel her blood pooling into his hand.

Jabez was knocked back as though he’d tried to hit a wall, stumbling in shock.

Orpheus could see a magic symbol in the air, one similar, but not the same, to the one he conjured in the human village in order to protect it. It was massive, spanning their entire bodies to shield them in a clear dome.

What is this? He’d never conjured a protective shield before. But, like all his magic, he discovered something new by accident when he needed it the most.

And right now, he needed to be able to protect them so he could take care of his injured female.

Jabez attacked it repeatedly, his face contorted into a hateful, teeth-baring glare, but none of his attacks broke

through or even damaged it. It sounded as though he was bashing against a glass window that refused shatter.

How did I do this? Usually something must be sacrificed in order for him to do such strong magic, a deal, a bargain. He lifted his palm to look at the crimson liquid that was glittering and disappearing before his eyes. *Her blood?*

“Or...pheus,” she grated, moving to her knees as she trembled.

He whined in answer, ignoring Jabez to look down at her.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a strained tone, his sight fading to a pale blue in both fear and sadness, both emotions too strong to overcome the other. “I did not protect you, Reia.”

I did not protect her. His pulse beat frantically. *I cannot heal wounds.* It was jutting from her shoulder blades; he knew a wound like this would kill her. *She is going to die.*

Quick breaths of anxiety pounded his chest.

But I don’t want to lose her...

Reia winced as she started to go limp, and Orpheus placed his arms under her neck and lower back to support her. She was partially lying in the air, and all she could feel was pain radiating through her back.

Each breath expanded her ribcage, making the area around the dagger ache.

It hurt. It hurt *so* much. It felt like there was a shard of fire inside her, and it burned.

Seeing he was unable to break through, the Demon King backed off with a terrible snarl, his face less pretty with the

expression he wore.

She reached up to cup Orpheus' snout, hearing tiny whimpers constantly breaking from his chest. She didn't know what to say, how to make him feel better. There was nothing they could do to fix this.

"Fine, watch your human die," Jabez sneered at them. Then he raised his hands in the air as if he was summoning something. "But I'll remove the cloaking aroma, and you can suffer through this and then the guilt you'll feel afterwards from eating her." The sweet smell in the air began to dissipate slowly. "You have about five minutes, Mavka. You better hope she dies before you're overcome with hunger at the smell of all the blood in the room and begin to eat her alive." Then he pointed to the crumbled body on the ground. "And Katerina too."

White flashed in his glowing orbs, showing his fear of this, before they returned to the dull blue.

He turned his head back down to her when she stroked up his face. "It's okay. You can eat me."

What else could she say? All she could do was ease his guilt if it happened.

"But I don't want you to die." She could hear the pain and sadness in his voice like a deep bottomless well, one that never ended. He tilted forward and pressed the length of his face against the side of her own. "You said you would stay with me, Reia." He shuddered against her, his arms moving around her to hold her closer. "I don't want you to leave me."

Tears began to well in her eyes, pooling to the point she could barely see through the murkiness of them.

"Y-you can get another human," she told him, wrapping her arms around him so she could dig her fingers into his back.

"But I don't want anyone else," he whined as shook his head against her. "They will not be you. They will not be brave and strong like you. They will not have the sun in their

hair, or the forest in their eyes, or the snow in their skin. They will not smell of your scent or have your voice.”

Oh God, what will happen to him when I die? If he didn’t want another human, did that mean Orpheus would be alone, *missing* her? Wanting no one because they wouldn’t be her?

Although she very much wasn’t fond of the pain she was in right now, Reia wasn’t afraid to die.

“You are precious to me.”

“Oh, boo hoo,” Jabez said, going up the steps and sitting on his throne to watch them while placing his cheek against his fist. “Come on, Mavka. Show me if your kind can cry. This is very entertaining for me.”

To have Orpheus’ pain mocked hurt her heart further.

“You weren’t even this sad when Katerina told you you were nothing but a worthless monster.”

Reia dug her fingers into him harder even though that tensed her back and made the piercing ache worsen. *He chose me over her.* Even when told lies about Reia and being told Katerina wanted him back, Orpheus had chosen to find Reia instead. *He trusted in me.*

“You gave me something no one else has wanted to give me, and I don’t want it from anyone but you.”

“And what is that?” she sobbed, her heart breaking further for him. Her tears finally fell, dripping from the corners of her eyes to run over her temples and into her hair.

“Someone who wanted to be by my side.”

Why does this have to hurt so much? His words were more painful than the damn dagger in her back.

I-I don’t want him to be sad, or alone. She’d seen it already from him in the beginning and watching it slowly fade the longer she’d been with him had been beautiful to witness. To slowly watch Orpheus turn from worried and hesitant to warm and affectionate had stolen her.

So without her, someone who needed him to light the candles of his home so she could see, would he sit in the

dark in that cabin alone? Crying, and whining, and yearning for Reia to come back to him?

She knew... had known for a while now that Orpheus was attached to her. That he didn't like being without her presence even for a few short hours to get her water – not because he didn't trust her to stay, but because he didn't like being away from her.

I don't know if I want to live forever. She wasn't attached to this world, didn't have a drive to stay in it. *But I don't want him to be sad for eternity.*

She could feel him quaking. She knew he was not okay, and that he wasn't going to be okay.

I... The emotions that swirled within told her the truth, the truth she didn't know if she wanted, but felt anyway. *I want to stay with him more than anything.*

For him. Because he needed her to, because he couldn't live peacefully without her, and Reia thought she might not be able to live without him either, if she was alive.

"Orpheus," she whispered, feeling the strength in her body slowly leaving her.

"No, Reia," he whimpered. "I do not want to find another human."

She tucked her head further against him.

"How do I give you my soul?"

I can live for eternity. Only if it meant she got to be with Orpheus. *If I can spend it with him, I'd be happy.*

In his home, surrounded by all the things he'd made, in his smell, and his embrace, with all the touches that made her melt for him. Cooking, making ornaments and protective trinkets, and clothes, and tending to the garden. Watching him roam the yard so he could make sure she was safe and protected or stoking the fireplace to make sure she was warm as he asked if she was comfortable or needed anything.

To feel pampered, cherished, admired, and beautiful. To not feel like just the only human that mattered, but the only

living creature in the world that mattered.

To be looked at by glowing orbs instead of eyes that reflected such deep emotions that his ethereal face couldn't show. She would be content being buried within fur that tickled her face as she caressed all the protruding bones of his body, and the draping fish fins that raised when she brushed her fingers over them.

Reia wanted to be with this strange being who was so completely and utterly different to her, but had a heart that was so tender and gentle that it was more pure than any child or innocent animal.

It didn't matter that he ate people, that others thought him a monster, not when he cared so much about her that he got upset when she pricked her finger on a sewing needle.

And yet, he'd cut her with his claw tips multiple times in the heat of the throws, was rough and naughty. He was always disappointed in himself after, but Reia wanted to show him that she adored it, that she liked the feel of them.

Reia was his. In body and in heart, all that was left was her soul.

"Your soul?" he asked, lifting his head back to stare down at her.

"H-how?"

She was feeling weaker by the second, and she was worried she'd waited too long to make this decision.

He leaned back in to hold her.

"You just have to want to give it me."

But I do. Why don't I... A hot feeling in her chest started to rise like it was coming from her spine.

She slipped her arms away from him to touch at her chest right between her breasts. When that heat touched her fingertips, she felt the unmistakable desire to pull away.

Something started to pull away from her. Beneath her palms, a bright light began to shine, and she cupped her hands around it when it was out of her body. Orpheus

leaned back once more to give her room as they both watched.

At first glance, she thought it was nothing but an orange-red flame, but upon closer inspection, it was actually a woman. A woman made of liquid fire, with hair that flowed up from her head like she was sinking under water.

She had the exact same body shape as Reia, and her eyes glowed with little dots of green.

Is this my soul? The spirit was on her knees. She looked at Reia and then twisted her body to look at Orpheus. She reached her arms out to him.

“No!” yelled Jabez as he stood from his throne, but neither one of them cared to pay him any attention.

“I want you to have it.”

When she started lifting her hands, giving him her soul, the spirit began to float on her knees, still reaching for him like she wanted him to take her. Even her soul wanted to go with him.

His orbs, for the first time, seemed reflective as he stared at it, the colour and shape of it mirroring in his eyes like a glare. He brought his head closer to sniff it, and her soul touched his snout as if she was hugging him.

It was sweet, until he suddenly chomped forward and ate it!

His body ruffled when he swallowed.

Of course, he ate it. Reia shouldn’t have been so surprised, and she couldn’t stop her lips from curling.

However, she thought she’d feel different if she did. That she would no longer be in pain or be dying, but she could feel the life draining from her body.

With the last of her strength, she cupped the sides of his jaw.

She didn’t know what would happen now or if this had even worked. It may have been too late. Reia could still disappear from him. But she hoped that everything would

be alright, and if it wasn’t, she wanted him to know just how much she cared for him.

“I love you, Orpheus,” she said so softly even she barely heard it coming from her, but she looked directly at him, so he knew it was the truth.

His orbs turned bright pink, and once more tears welled in her eyes. *He*— before she could even finish her thought, she became dazed as her vision blurred heavily and her arms fell limply. *He...*

Blackness washed over her as she lost consciousness.

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She gave me her soul.

There was a heat in his stomach that didn't belong to him, but it felt remarkable as it was slowly started fluttering around his body to find a place to live.

Orpheus watched as Reia's eyes rolled unnaturally into the back of her head as her eyelids slowly started shutting at the same time. Her hands fell from him, one slipping to the side to dangle while the other landed across her stomach.

The pink in his vision quickly turned to white when he heard her heartbeat stop, when her lungs quietened into utter stillness, when blood ceased flowing. She felt warm, but it was fading.

Was... Was I not supposed to eat it? This seemed *wrong*. He thought he would feel something, like a connection to her, the ability to feel her presence. All he felt was the fluttering warmth that he thought one might feel when they'd eaten a satisfying meal – even though he'd never experienced something like that.

She was dead. He knew she was dead, could see it, feel it, hear it, but he somehow thought it would spring her back to life. Like the dagger would disappear and she'd reach up to hug him. *She is gone?*

She can’t be gone. He didn’t want her to be.

“Reia?”

He tilted his head as he bumped his snout against her cheek, trying to stir her back to life.

Deep blue, deeper than he’d ever seen it, filled his vision, making everything he looked at a swallowing colour of sadness.

He removed his arm supporting her lower back so he could gingerly use a claw to move some of her hair covering her face. He was waiting for something, anything, a sign that said she would be okay. However, it felt hollowing to crouch here holding his lifeless female.

The moment he moved her hair, the skin on her cheek flaked like a piece of ash that was breaking apart. He darted his hand away, but another appeared above her brow, then the side of her jaw.

An acute whine shuddered his lungs when Reia began to *disintegrate.* Like ash, she was breaking apart, pieces of her skin curling before falling from her.

Faster and faster she broke apart before the comfortable weight of her became significantly lighter. She caved in around his arms, giving him nothing to hold.

He dug through the ash while fretting, claws cutting at stone, as the little grey flecks grew smaller as if she was turning to dust.

His orbs felt weighty as coldness trickled over his skull, but he didn’t stop digging even when there was nothing left.

“Reia? Reia!”

Where is she? Where did she go?

“That was strange,” Jabez chuckled. “But it looks as if she is gone, Mavka. No little human for you.”

He started to clap, applauding the show Orpheus was giving him as Orpheus panicked, darting his head around to look for her. *She can’t be gone. She can’t be dead.*

She gave him her soul. *She is meant to eternally be with me, safe.* That was what the Witch Owl told him. She said

that if he wanted to be content with a human, they would need to give him their soul and he would take it to keep, to protect, to hold for them.

She didn't tell him to eat it, only that he would know what to do with it when he saw it. Orpheus had felt an uncontrollable desire to eat it, consume it, have it within him.

Reia's soul was his to keep.

The sweet cloaking aroma was finally gone, but he didn't feel an urge of hunger at Katerina's body and the smell of blood that was coming off her. There was lots of it, enough to put any Mavka into a frenzy, but all he felt, all he thought about, was finding Reia.

But she disappeared. Vanished in front of him. *Did she go somewhere?*

Did the Demon King have her?

Orpheus growled as he lifted his gaze to him. He was a threat. He had harmed Reia, and the idea that he might actually be harbouring her somewhere filled him with rage.

He was filled with powerful magic, maybe he had stolen her once more by tricking him into thinking she'd crumbled apart.

Lunging, he ran through the bubble shield and dived for Jabez. His eyes widened and Orpheus managed to slice his claws across his face before he disappeared when he tried to grab him.

By the time he was materialising, Orpheus was already moving. His desperation, his determination, made him quicker. The adrenaline felt like acid moving through his veins, pumping his muscles with cold burning.

"Give her to me!"

Jabez hissed at him when Orpheus tackled him while snapping his jaws to chomp into his head. The Demon King had to dodge his head to the left and then right, so he wasn't bitten before fading.

"I don't have her, Mavka."

Orpheus wasn’t listening.

For centuries, this creature had been teasing and tormenting him, using any means to make Orpheus suffer. To fight him, to try to destroy his home when the charms had broken, to steal Katerina and then many of his offerings. Orpheus had known he’d kill them before he could make it to the castle, and the only reason he’d hoped he hadn’t done the same to Reia was because he’d left behind the amulet this time.

Orpheus was like a rabid, crazed, animal as he sprinted across the throne room with such speed it had Jabez on the back foot. He was growing angrier, Orpheus’ constant attacking – and injuring him – irritating him.

He teleported behind Orpheus to grab his horns so he could hold onto him, and he quickly spun his head around on his neck to face him over his back. Orpheus snapped his jaws around Jabez’s hand before it could reach him, gnawing through the muscles, tendons, and then the bones of his forearm.

Jabez yelled, yanking back to sever his own arm while Orpheus’ body was slowly turning around so he could claw at him.

He teleported next to his throne to escape.

“This is no longer entertaining,” Jabez bit while holding the stump of his arm, placing his palm against it to stem the bleeding. “Leave, Mavka. I don’t have your human.”

Orpheus shook his head, hearing a singular bell jingle, as he snarled and crawled closer.

“You stole her from me.”

His female, his human, his little doe that didn’t deserve to die the way she did.

He shouldn’t have had to witness her weakening heartbeat, her lungs wheezing on breaths. To feel her body growing cold with lifelessness. He knew he’d never get the memory of it out of his mind.

Within seconds, Jabez was on his back, slow from blood loss and pain. Orpheus tore into his chest before he managed to get his bare feet between them.

“Get the fuck out of my castle!” Jabez roared as he booted Orpheus off him.

Orpheus flew across the room, and through a small portal.

Landing against dirt that puffed into the air at the disturbance of his body, he rolled over it into thick grass. The sun was fading, the Veil’s forest making it seem like night was settling in long before it was supposed to.

Swiftly turning to the portal so he could face Jabez once more, it was gone, and he drifted his gaze around to find himself in front of their home.

A curt whine ached his chest. *Reia?*

He walked towards the house on all fours, shoving himself through the doorway that was too narrow for his body in his monstrous form.

The air felt cold, the house empty without the candles lit yet. He pushed the living room chairs out of the way, trying to see if she was curled up in hers even though he could plainly see she wasn’t.

He walked into the kitchen, sniffing the ground, before knocking over the chair she usually sat on at the dining table to check under it, but she wasn’t there either.

Stepping down the hallway, the scents in the air told him they were old, that she wasn’t here, but he couldn’t stop himself from looking, from checking, thinking perhaps his nose was misleading him.

He opened her bedroom door and found the sheets empty. He lifted the bed to check under it. The side table fell onto its side when he turned in the room so he could leave it.

Sniffing at the bottom of the door of his room, he clawed open the door, wanting to find her in his bed, but found nothing. Shoving his head under it, as if she might be hiding, he didn’t find her there either.

He also didn’t find her in the tub, a place where it was difficult to smell her if she was covered in water.

The garden? She wasn’t usually in the garden at this time of day, but he went there anyway, being careful not to damage the plants she would eat.

Orpheus circled their home, hoping she would appear, but she never did. He had no idea where she could be.

He sat, digging his claws into his back and chest when his insides felt as though they were squirming. The cold trickling sensation on his skull never ceased, and his body felt *wrong.* Nothing felt right. His heart felt as though it was going to burst on every pump, so filled with loss and pain. It ached so deeply. Every breath was a wheezing cry, and he gouged his claws over himself.

He felt lost.

I didn’t protect her. Orpheus had failed her. *She was hurt because of me.* Because of Katerina and for whatever Orpheus had done to her to make her hate him so much.

What did I do wrong? Why wasn’t Orpheus allowed to have Reia, to live, in Katerina’s mind?

He had wanted to make her as happy as she had made him.

Where is Reia? His feet started moving. He headed towards the forest, crossing the salt circle so he could check behind shrubs and trees, under large stones as if she could hide under them.

Orpheus felt... broken. His mind was filled with only thoughts of her, his body and heart feeling utterly and completely lonely.

That singular bell hanging from his horn jingled and it caught his attention each time. It was a like a ringing of madness to him. A single bell without its pair.

One. Alone. Mismatched. Just like him without Reia.

His body started moving quicker as he looked. *I have to find her.* He would search to the ends of the world, would

cross the Veil, the surface if he had to, until he found her. He would be a lost creature searching, never stopping. Forever.

He wouldn't sleep, wouldn't eat, wouldn't stop. He would search all the way to the void of the afterlife if he needed to.

He started sprinting, sniffing the air for just a hint of elderberries and red roses. *Reia...*

He paid no mind to the Demons he ran past.

"Orpheus." He heard her voice, but it sounded distant – like it was far away in his memories.

He shook his head with a whine, the jingle he heard making him sprint faster. *I need her.*

Orpheus didn't just want her, he needed her. He needed her to chase away the darkness he'd always felt by brightening his life.

His sight was so dark that he could barely see, but he would look until she was with him again.

"Orpheus."

He heard her voice louder this time, but it pained him so acutely he let out a bellowing roar to the forest in response.

It hurts...

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Reia started as she regained consciousness, her eyes snapping open.

She felt no pain, like her wound was gone, as she looked up into darkness. *Where am I?* She thought she might be dead, but she realised that it wasn't empty darkness she was staring into, but a quick movement of tress as she passed under their branches.

Am I in the forest? She turned her head to the right to see the shadows of dark tree trunks passing her vision.

Seeing she was moving as she lay down on her back, she expected to feel the bite of wind, perhaps the cold of it. She couldn't feel it. Actually, she felt nothing at all.

Not the air, not her own heartbeat, or even her own breaths.

She tilted her head forward as she lifted her arms, only to go wide-eyed. *I'm transparent.* She could see the shape of her hands like a white glow, but she could see through it, see her body and the forest behind it.

Am I a ghost? She touched her face to feel it, knowing she felt pressure, but not the actual touch of either. Not her face upon her hands, or her hands upon her face.

It felt as though her body was floating and she looked down to see what she was lying on. Except she wasn't lying

on anything but floating above it.

“Orpheus?” she asked, seeing him below her and somehow dragging her along.

His only answer was a whine and she frowned at the suffering she heard in it. She turned over and tried to touch him. Her hand went through him!

She recoiled and brought it back. *I can’t touch him.*

There was a flame between his horns, tied to them by inky, goopy, black string. She felt the warmth of it when she tried to touch it, but her hand went through it as well. It did flicker brighter, though.

“Orpheus,” she tried to yell, wanting him to stop running so she could figure out what was going on.

His heart-aching roar made her shrink.

Shit, he can’t hear me properly.

She wanted to stop floating with him and show that she was here. *Is he searching for me?*

Looking down to her palms, her eyes crinkled in confusion. If she was a ghost, she would be able to be with him forever, but what point was there in this? She couldn’t touch him, he couldn’t hold her, and it would be meaningless.

This wasn’t what she wanted. *I want my body back!*

She started sinking through him like a heavy weight in her gut was pressing her down.

They separated when she touched the ground, and she *felt* it. The coldness, the dirt, the hard stick that poked her in the arse. Thankfully, she was still wearing the dress she had been wearing before she died, otherwise that may have truly hurt.

The sound of his footsteps thumping grew softer as he kept running, not knowing of what just happened. She once more turned her gaze to her hands to see they were solid, and she almost slapped herself in the face trying to touch it.

I’m physical again? All she had done was want her body back, and she had it.

Rustling in one of the trees brought her attention to the fact she was now physical, and *alone*, in the forest of the Veil, in the dark, in what must be the middle of the night.

Reia scrambled to her feet, reaching her hand out in the direction he'd gone.

"Orph—" She didn't get to finish her shout before a Demon tackled her to the ground.

Her scream was cut short when fangs bit into her throat as claws sliced across her chest. Burning pain invaded her senses, and Reia fought and struggled as she felt herself being eaten alive. The sound of her skin tearing, her own gargles, were the last thing she heard alongside the snarling and smacking of lips.

The creeping chill of blood loss washed her under, numbing her of pain, until she faded from the world.

When she opened her eyes once more, she found herself staring up at the canopy of trees swiftly moving over her. She turned to find she was floating above Orpheus once more.

I'm back? She really thought she'd die permanently that time. *Holy crap, I don't want to feel that ever again.* Getting eaten was now even higher on her list of how she never wanted to fucking die – and it had been high on her list to begin with.

Orpheus was running and she didn't know how to stop him. No matter how much she called out to him, how much she begged for him to stop, he would cry and shake his head. The singular bell sounding off seemed to make it worsen.

She needed her body back. He needed to be able to see her, smell her.

However, the moment she willed for her body, she would begin to sink through him again. She'd fret, wanting to stay ghostly, and she'd begin to float again.

She could also separate from him as she floated, but she needed to stay with him if she wanted to stop him. He was

moving too fast for her to get in front of him and the one time she had, he'd run through her midsection without actually seeing her completely.

And the sounds he made to anything she tried to do to in order to stop him made her realise she was *haunting* him. He didn't realise it was Reia, and most likely thought it was just a trick of his mind.

She wished she could become physical and land on top of his back but no matter how she tried, she kept sinking through him instead.

What do I do? she thought, resting her cheek on her folded arms as she lay over him while facing down.

A large white bird came into view in their path as it stood there, halting Orpheus completely as if he was afraid and making him shuffle his feet to stop. It turned to them, its eyes seeming to meet Reia's rather than his, before it flew off.

The Witch Owl? It had looked like the human-sized owl that had once dance-walked across their yard in the rain.

Orpheus was huffing loudly, panting misting breaths through his nose hole and fangs. He stepped forward slowly now that she was gone.

He was moving again. *This is my chance!*

Before he could start running, Reia floated in front of him.

His head reared back as he stumbled away. Then he twisted his head at her ghostly form as she floated there with her feet hovering above the ground by an inch.

"Reia?" he asked in a voice that was so full of hope it was damning, as he leaned in to sniff her.

His snout passed through her and he whined, shaking his head before turning away.

"Orpheus," she quick said, stepping in front of him once more. "I'm here, please don't run."

"But you are not there." He reached his claw forward to show that it went through her body. "You are not real. I must find you."

Her gaze swept over his from entirely, and she felt so much pity for him. *Oh, Orpheus...* His body was quaking and trembling all over like a frightened, injured animal, but it was his glowing orbs that had her sad for him.

It looked as though the bottom of them were broken, like they had been made of glass, and a glowing liquid was slowly trickling out of them. It dripped into the empty eye holes of his skull before going down the sides of his cheek bones to drip into the air, almost floating before they disappeared.

It looked as though he was weeping.

“I’m here.” She placed her hands around his snout while trying to make them not go through him. “I can’t be with you right now. You’re in the forest, it’s too dangerous.”

He stepped away from her and lowered himself with confusion.

“But I cannot hold you like this. Where is your body? You’re a ghost, Reia. This isn’t what I wanted.”

She refused to allow him to get away by following him.

“Can you take me home, Orpheus?”

He shook his head. “I already searched there.”

“I promise you everything will be alright. Only when we are home can I be with you.”

He whimpered lightly in response, his head turning to look in the direction he’d been heading like he wanted to keep searching.

“Please?” His head turned to her once more at the sound of her plea. “Don’t you want to keep me safe?”

Actually, as Reia was right now, she was as safe as she could possibly be in the Veil. Nothing could ever harm her like this.

“Home?” he asked, hesitantly stepping forward slightly. “You will be at home with me?”

“Yes. At home I’ll turn physical for you.”

He tilted his head at that, but started to walk. He stopped if she wasn’t in front of him, like he wanted to see her, stare

at her, look through her, as he made his way back to their cabin.

It was slow, and he stayed low as though he was uncertain.

“I miss you, Reia,” he said softly, reaching out to touch her again before bringing his hand back when he couldn’t. “How can you be with me if you’re a ghost?”

Am I a ghost? Ghosts couldn’t turn physical.

They were humans that were so desperate to live after being eaten by Demons that they haunted the places they were killed. They were trapped within the borders of their homes or the forests, stuck there forever.

But Reia kept returning to him, and she could turn back to normal.

What am I then? She tried to think on what else she could be.

Then a section in one of the books the Witch Owl gave to her came into her memory, the one about creatures – both real and mythical. She’d recently learned that Elves were real, but from another world, and there had also been a page about *Phantoms.*

Creatures that lived on the cusp of life and death; a spirit being who had a human body if they wished. They were usually anchored to something, and she turned her gaze to the floating flame above his head between his horns.

But it wasn’t a flame.

It was the little spirit she’d pulled from her body. She was curled up in the fetal position, facing forward. Her ankles were crossed, her knees to her chest as she hugged them, while her face pressed against the nook of them. The flame hair was still floating.

From afar, it looked like nothing but a rounded flame, but up close, it was easy to see it was her soul.

She looked comfortable, as if it was only sleeping while being wrapped in the black, goopy string that threaded

around its legs, its body, and even throat, that then attached to his horns.

He is my anchor. Orpheus had tied her soul to him, literally.

“I think you made me a Phantom,” she told him, not looking behind her, trusting that he would lead them back.

“What is a Phantom?”

He didn’t know this would happen to me? She explained what she thought over the time it took them until they were passing over the salt circle.

He took them inside and she was greeted by the chaos of him searching inside the house.

The dining table was skewed from where it usually rested, her chair turned on its side. The chairs in the living room were parted with the little table between them knocked over. Items on tables had been scattered to the floor, as if he’d lifted the object they rested on to check underneath in places she couldn’t possibly hide.

How silly, she thought with a sad smile.

She looked to him to find he was crouching in front of her, staring and waiting. She wondered if he would have patiently sat there for eternity for her to turn physical for him.

All she had to do was will for it, as if she’d done this a million times, and her incorporeal body began to sink. Her toes were the first to feel sensation as they touched the timber floor before she sank to her heels. Pressure trailed up her legs, her hips, her chest, and then her head.

Placing her hands forward, she gave Orpheus a warm smile when she cupped her palms underneath the jaw of his snout, touching the warmth and hardness of the bone.

His fangs parted as he rasped, “Reia.”

He shot forward, swiftly closing the space between them so he could hold her, his arms squeezing her to him when he lifted her to stand.

Wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, she felt his tense muscles soften with her in his embrace.

She didn’t know he could stand up on his hindlegs in his monstrous form, but even though he was slightly curled forward, she felt comfortable and supported.

She stroked the back of his skull down to the fur behind his neck sticking out from under it.

“Hello, my big Duskwalker.”

He held her tighter, near crushing her. He started brushing his claws down her body, feeling her, touching her, stroking her from shoulder all the way down to her backside and thigh.

“I should have protected you. I shouldn’t have let you be harmed.” He started to lower them as if he couldn’t maintain standing and allowed her to step back just far enough so they could face each other while he still had an arm around her. “You died in my hands. Are you angry with me?”

“Not at all.” His eyes were still the same well of blue, like the deepest part of the ocean, and they were still trickling. She worried she needed to ease his guilt. “You aren’t to blame for what happened. Please don’t feel that way.”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to the tip of his rounded snout. She did it to the side, then the top, then over his fangs on the other side. Each time he came a little closer while his hand slid up her body.

When she went to kiss his cheek, he placed his large hand at the base of her skull to hold her still and lightly swiped his tongue over her lips. The second time, she met his tongue with her own.

Then he became incessant, licking at her and hoping she’d greet him each time.

She placed her arms around his neck before slipping one over his cheek to rub it, then going back to hold him.

“Reia, I…” His fingers slipped up into her hair to thread them through it with the delicious scrape of his claws. “I need you. I need to feel you.”

Her gaze locked on his, seeing they were still so sad and trickling, like he couldn’t stop from feeling low.

She wanted to give him what he needed, to touch her. But she couldn’t, not with such an expression that was unbearably painful to look at.

She wondered… *He would never hurt me.*

“What would happen if I were to make you chase me?”

She didn’t care if his eyes were red if he took her, if he was hungry or angry, it would be better than seeing his pain. She knew he’d done enough running in the past day, but she needed to break him out of this.

“I don’t want to chase you.”

When she tried to back out of his arms, and he wouldn’t let her, Reia willed her body to turn incorporeal. She floated past his arms, and he followed her slowly while crouched.

“But I want you to hunt for me, Orpheus.”

“I don’t know what will happen. I might hurt you.” Those trickles seemed to go a little faster as the glowing spot floating around his skull holes became more persistent. “Why do you want me to do this?”

“I’m yours to catch.” He tilted his head as she smiled. She bent like she was about to kiss him, but instead said, “And when you do, you can have me.”

Purple flashed but dulled back to that sadness instantly. Then she was gone, fading past the wall.

“Come get me, Orpheus.”

“Reia?” Her heart stung at how panicked it sounded.

She immediately turned back to her physical body so he could at least smell her and have something to track. She was at the back of the house, and within seconds he was sprinting towards her.

His eyes were still blue, still trickling. Right before he could grab her, she turned ghostly again, and he ran

through her.

“Please don’t do this,” he whimpered as he stalked her while she floated backwards.

“Don’t you want me?” she teased, moving to the side. “Don’t you want to catch your prey?”

She went through the house, finding it odd to only have her shoulders up through the floor. Avoiding the garden completely in case he tore it apart, she moved to the other side of the house.

Materialising solid, Reia waited until she could hear which direction he was coming from before she started running in the opposite direction. She ran up the front of the house, peeking over her shoulder to see his eyes flash red a few times.

Of course, he was faster than her, and he lunged through her when she turned ghostly once more. He spun to her, his eyes holding red a little longer this time.

“Reia,” he warned, lowering himself as stalked forward.

“Your little doe wants you to fuck her.” Purple tried to take over before that damned blue took in once more! But at least the trickling had begun to settle. It was barely present now. “She’s starting to think you don’t want to.”

Before he could even answer, she was floating through the house once more. She squeaked when she came out the other side to find him already heading towards her.

With a giggle, finding his eyes flickering faster between the red and blue, she ducked back inside. She waited a few seconds and then poked her head out exactly where she’d just been to find he was gone.

She turned physical and started running as she headed towards the garden.

She heard him too late, expecting to hear his feet thumping behind her. Reia was tackled to the ground from the front with arms wrapping around her and protecting most of her body as they landed with her beneath him.

“*Stay,*” he growled, curling around her body to keep her to him – like that would do anything to truly hold her in place.

Orpheus was huffing wildly, and she could feel his heart beating just as frantically. His claws were digging into her shoulder and hip through her clothes.

She’d finally gotten what she wanted; his eyes red and full as if they were no longer broken and leaking. However, it wasn’t enough.

She was playing a dangerous game. She knew it, but it didn’t stop her from placing her lips against his cheek with a curling smirk.

“If you’re not immediately inside my pussy when you catch me, you don’t get to keep me.”

She turned incorporeal in his arms, fretting slightly when she started to float upwards through him.

Orpheus slammed his claws into the ground, gouging into the dirt that he left tracks of them behind. Shaking as he lifted his head up to face her, Orpheus snarled with wet fangs, his orbs growing more crimson.

“I will keep you.”

She knew he was truly enraged by his jaws parting slightly, showing all his fangs and a curling tongue.

“I’m already yours.”

Floating backwards, she let him chase her for a bit, before she went through the house. Reia waited, knowing he was somewhere out there, sniffing, searching, *hunting*, for her.

Her heart was racing with excitement, the thrill of *being* hunted like an aphrodisiac. She had started this for him, but now she was growing impatient to be taken, to be filled.

In her incorporeal body she couldn’t feel anything, but when she was physical, her body tingled from her head all the way to her toes. She wanted to run, she wanted to be caught, but most of all, she wanted Orpheus inside her. And she wanted him *fierce,* she wanted him rough, she wanted him to be feral with her.

Her underwear was clinging to the wetness of her pussy, soaked and dripping with more arousal every time her body thrummed with need. Reia felt empty and hollow.

Already near panting, she came out at the back of the house to find he wasn't there.

He must have smelt her, because she heard a growl that seemed to come from *everywhere.* It made her skin dance with shivers as goosebumps broke out. Her fingers went warm with her growing temperature, arousal heating her.

Her head darted one way and then the other, her feet moving almost skittishly as she worked her way to the front of the house.

"Don't run."

She nearly screamed when she heard his voice from above! Turning around, she saw him crawling over the top of the house, stalking towards her before he jumped down.

His hands and feet thudded against the ground, his head tilting unnaturally to the point it was almost upside down. With his red eyes, it was scary, creepy, and she fucking liked it.

Her face twinged when she felt her abdomen spasm, her inner walls quivering for this, for him like this in his most monstrous form.

"Stay," he warned, when she started retreating.

Her smile was her answer, before she bolted.

Reia made it five steps before she was tackled to her stomach. Claws dug, growling rumbled, and she squirmed as she tried to crawl forward since only one of his arms were around her midsection.

In one breath, he was under her skirt and ripping her underwear from her. In the next, Orpheus shoved himself inside her all the way to the base, tentacles snapping into place around her hips.

A sharp gasp was ripped from her. The snug fit was intense after their time apart, her body still able to take him,

but tighter. Her arousal and his lubricant had eased the entry, but Reia had felt a deep twinge of pain.

However, she panted deeply, tremors rolling through her body at the girth of his cock, the length of it filling her, the sheer heat of it warming her insides. She melted on her knees with her face pressed against the grass, her eyelids shuddering in euphoria as she pressed her hips against him to feel him even deeper.

So hot. He's so hot inside me.

Orpheus had groaned upon impact, but now he was quaking, his claws digging into the bare flesh of her waist with his hand under the skirt of her dress that had been pushed up over her backside. His other hand was flat against the ground, as if he needed to steady himself through her gloving him finally.

His tentacles felt longer than usual, as if they were the same length as his cock in his monstrous form. They swirled around her backside, her hips, and reached to his hand at her waist. Two were sitting in the dips where her arse met her thighs, one was over her hip, but the last one was directly over her clit, sitting inside the lips of her folds.

He lowered himself to his forearm, coating her body with his and bringing his snout next to her ear so she could hear him huffing loudly.

Despite the purple of desire flickering in his eyes, red remained present.

"Got you."

Her body clung to him as he pulled back, making her whimper in loss, before he surged forward.

Orpheus started to thrust, sending tingles through her. She cried lightly on each one as she felt the shape of him and those frills tickling her insides. His cock felt sublime pressing and digging everywhere she needed him.

He was moving steadily inside her, pushing deep, his tentacle rubbing back over her the nub of her clit, but... it wasn't enough.

He was slower than she wanted, softer than she needed him to be, and not as deep as she desired.

“More,” she begged, attempting to undulate into him. “Give me more, Orpheus.”

I need him to be rougher. She wanted the growling monster who had been chasing her, not the gentle Duskwalker who was always worried about her.

His hips quickened beautifully for a few short seconds before they slowed. A quivering pant fell from him afterwards.

“Quiet, Reia.” In its own way, it was a plea.

A plea for her not to push him, that he was already on the verge of losing control, that he couldn’t have Reia asking for more in case he lost himself and gave it to her.

She gritted her teeth as she dug her fingertips into the grass to grab clumps of it.

“Fuck me, Orpheus. Take me.” She wanted him to make her scream, to cry, to ravish her body. “Harder. *Faster.* Deeper.”

His claws cut into her skin while they also gouged into the dirt and grass beneath them. His body shuddered as he gave her just a little taste of what she wanted, and she nearly went cross-eyed before he settled again.

Frustration bloomed within her.

“*I can’t,*” he whined, and the only reason she knew he shook his head is because she heard the bell jingle. *“I will hurt you.”*

She buried her head against the ground, feeling the wonderful glide of his cock, but wanting everything it had to give. Tension was building, needing an outlet that was currently pumping between her thighs as though he couldn’t stop moving.

I need it. I need it so much. Her orgasm was slowly coiling tight like a spring, but she needed it to shatter her like glass. To render her struck under its force, blinded by it, altered by it.

“Stop hesitating, Orpheus!” she yelled, lifting her head so she could speak while panting. “I’m yours. I’m not going to go away. I’m not going to disappear. Hurt me, claw me, fucking bite me. I want you to, I want you to give me everything. I want your cock pounding into me. What more do I have to do to get you to let go with me?”

The threat of tears stung her eyes. She wanted him to thrust into her like he was swept over by a madness. She wanted him so much she didn’t care if he ripped her in two by the end, broke her apart, fucked her to death. She’d come back to him, would stay with him.

When he still didn’t, she screamed, “I gave you my soul!”

A bellowing roar sounded behind her. He started slamming into her, deep hard pounds that shoved her entire body forward.

He started to lean back as his hips quickened, his hand remaining curled around her waist to clasp it completely while the other pressed against her shoulder blades with splayed fingers. He was pining her down with sharp claws digging in, holding her still against his tentacles that threatened to yank her with him, as he drove into her body with a frenzy.

It was so deep she didn’t think she’d felt him reach like this, so hard that it almost hurt, so fast that she couldn’t tell if he was coming in or out. She couldn’t tell where he ended and she began, and each thrust inwards knocked the breath out of her seizing lungs.

His tentacle slipping over her clit, rubbing and stroking it with its little nodules, had her near weeping at the feeling.

“Yes,” she tried to say with her lack of air. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

Somehow, he went faster, and her legs kicked out. It was like she was trying to crawl forward, to get away and escape, as her orgasm took her by the reigns and drowned her.

Crying out, she wrung his cock with heavy wet spasms as she lost herself to him. His snarls, his grunts, this strange purr sound mixed in with it, ached her mind.

It was torture, and it was bliss. Reia had found heaven in the Veil, and it was given to her by the cock of a Duskwalker that was fucking her into oblivion.

He didn’t stop even when she stopped coming, her body so lax that she could do nothing but take it. Her eyes were so dazed that her vision was murky as she stared at nothing with the tree line blurry, but she didn’t have enough tension to close them. Tears fell from them to drip down her nose and cheek at the intense pleasure.

Orpheus was crushing her under his grip, pressing down on her with his body, and she adored it. Like an anchor to this world, it made her feel alive – despite the fact she felt like she was going to pass out from his onslaught, growing dizzier by the second.

Thoughts left her other than his name whispering in her mind. She couldn’t speak. She could only feel him pounding into her with wild frantic thrusts. In and out rapidly as her insides were stroked constantly before his slams stole her very voice. She could only hear him as her cries were snuffed by the loudness of his sounds, his breath.

She smelt grass, she smelt dirt, and she wished she could smell him.

Her inner walls were squeezing, hungrily sucking him when she started coming again. Her scream must have echoed out into the forest beyond the safety of their home, but she didn’t care.

She was too consumed by Orpheus to know if a Demon had come to inspect them fucking outside.

She was getting exactly what she wanted as her body bounced and scraped against the dirt. Her orgasm dripping down her thighs, tickling her and making her squirm further. *Only prey squirms,* and she’d wriggle as much as she could

if it would send him even further into the craze of his desires.

His thrusts sounded wetter. Like a constant sucking sound as his cock moved within her pussy, stirring her and her orgasms around. They squelched.

An acute whine came from him before he shoved himself in deep while pulling her on him, burrowing into her so hard and deep it made her back arch downwards under its force. She knew he'd cut her with his claws when she felt pain and the welling of blood, but she barely felt it as he filled her so completely, she could feel the bulges of his embedded sac right at her entrance as if they too were trying to push in.

Her tongue fell forward like she needed it to in order to help her breath through her panting, when she felt his hot semen pouring into her, his cock swelling over and over to match them. Quick, heavy bursts invaded every inch of her swiftly, making her legs tremble at the feeling of it spreading through her.

Orpheus groaned so loudly that it almost sounded of pain. She managed to look back to see his head was pointing to the sky with his jaw widely parted.

He started pumping lightly like he didn't want to stop, and it made the thick liquid inside her squelch before it seeped out of her. *It feels so goooood.*

When he was finished, he slipped out of her as he collapsed to his side next to her. Desperately huffing, his body twitched and spasmed all over as his fur and fins rose and fell as though they couldn't settle.

Reia fell forward as she'd long ago lost the strength in her body, and the only thing that had been holding her up had been his tentacles keeping her to him.

After a few moments of him heaving as though he was trying to catch the breaths he'd lost, his eyes black as if they were closed, he reached out and dragged her closer. He curled himself around her with all his limbs with his hands kneading her flesh lightly.

He didn’t nuzzle her, but she knew he would have if he wasn’t so spent of energy.

For a little while, they laid there together holding each other closely. She’d never had Orpheus so out of sorts afterwards that he needed to recover like this.

She could feel against her stomach that his tentacles had closed around his cock completely even though it was fully extended, and that it was slowly receding back inside him. His body started to shift as it did, returning to the calm Orpheus whose clothes were slowly coming back like they’d been hidden somewhere within him.

“Reia…” he said softly, like was hesitant about asking a question. “Would… Would you make me a new bell?”

She lifted her head to look up at the underneath of his jaw. “Is it bothering you that much?

“Yes. I am sorry that she broke it.”

“Don’t be, it’s not your fault.” She patted her hands over his back. “I’m really glad I killed her. Are you upset about it?”

“No. The only thing that matters is you.”

Dragging herself higher, she came face-to-face with him and started to fiddle with his horn. “I’m happy to make you another bell. I’ll remove this one for now, so you don’t have to hear it.”

“Thank you,” he rasped, before licking at her cheek with only the tip of his tongue.

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Reia sat naked on Orpheus' lap while they were seated on his bed – which she very much thought was hers as well. He wanted to be able to touch her bare body, to stroke his fingertips and claws over her as though he wanted to touch her, feel her, see that she was in front of him.

He'd removed his own clothing so she could do the same, and he'd been surprised when she opted to straddle his hips. Her knees didn't touch the bed beneath him.

His glowing orbs were their normal light blue, and she was relieved to see them.

"Did you eat me Orpheus?" She gave him a warm smile to show him she wouldn't be upset at all if he did.

"No. You… crumbled like ash in my arms, but I was not hungry even before you did."

Her brows drew together. "But you told me you are always hungry."

"You gave me your soul," he commented, lifting his hand to scrape her scalp with his claw tips knowing it would make her shiver. "It was very pretty." He brushed them through her hair as though he wanted to comb it neat himself. "Once I ate it, all my hunger disappeared."

"So, you didn't feel any desire to eat me, or even Katerina?"

He shook his head before tilting it as he brushed his claws over her bare shoulder, making her skin prickle with goosebumps.

“No. Even earlier when I was chasing you or when I smelt your blood, I didn’t feel hunger.” She knew he looked back to her when he lifted his face. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

His fingertips lightly trailed over the five small slices around her waist from where he’d cut her with his claws when he came.

They stung a little but were mostly okay.

“I liked it. I liked you being like that. I want you to be yourself. To take me anyway you want without being worried.”

“You are so perfect, my bride.” He leaned forward and bumped the tip of his snout against her cheek affectionately.

That was the first time he’d called her his bride, and her smile grew brighter.

She leaned into his bony skull to return his touch.

“And you are wonderful, my big, beautiful Duskwalker.”

“Beautiful?” He reared his head back as dark yellow seeped into his orbs. He lifted his hand to touch at the wolfish skull of his face. “You are beautiful, Reia. I look like a monster.”

Her brows knitted while her eyes bowed to hear him call himself that.

“I disagree. I think you look lovely. You have an other-worldly, ethereal kind of beauty, Orpheus, and I’m so glad I allowed myself to see it.” She rose herself enough so that she could place her lips against one of his largest fangs. “You are also very sweet, and I fell for you because of who you are.”

His orbs turned a reddish-pink in embarrassment, and she couldn’t stop herself from laughing. *So damn sweet.*

“Here, let me show you.”

Reia slipped her hand from his chest down his body.

His abdomen dipped when they drifted over his navel. Then she started brushing her fingertips over the seam that hid his cock.

“What are you—” His words were cut short when Reia started pushing her fingers *inside* him.

His head tilted back, his body tensed, when almost slimy wetness greeted her once she’d sunk them in to her knuckles. It was confusing inside. She didn’t know if she was touching a soft cock or a flexible tentacle.

She creased her brows in concentration as she looked down, seeing that his hands were fisting the furs next to them. She dug deeper, and he whimpered. Just when she thought she felt the frills on his cockhead, and that it was stiffening enough for her to find it in the hot and soft mess behind his seam, one of his hands shot forward to grab her wrist.

Her head darted up. He was still looking to ceiling with his back arched.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No. Feels strange.” He shuddered once more, and his hips even lifted like he wanted her fingers deeper. “But really good.”

“Then why are you stopping me?”

“I don’t know.”

Reia came closer and pressed her lips to the underneath of his jaw, then the fur over his neck, then his chest.

“Then just relax and let me touch you.”

She pushed through his hold. She knew she found his cock when it felt harder, and those frills tickled her palm. Stroking the head, it was like she was the one pulling it from his seam as it started to extrude without the protection of his tentacles surrounding it. They slipped out when he was halfway erect, coming from his seam with searching tips to latch onto something. She was too far away from them, and they wriggled in the air.

Reia stroked the long length of his cock as she squeezed him with one hand partially around the girth of it.

His rough, calloused palm slid over her side, brushing her as he made a path to her breasts. Only when her hand left his seam and was stroking him completely while fully hard, did he look down to her to greet her with a gaze of deep purple.

Stroking her nipple with his thumb, pressing into it and circling it so it moved under the pad of it, she felt jolts sparking through the mound. He cupped the other, covering it completely as though he wanted to feel the weight and firmness of her breast.

“You are so soft. I like the way your body feels.”

His tongue came out to lick across her lips, and Reia stroked hers back, losing herself to the passion building between them.

She played with the large, mushroom-shaped broad head as she brought her hand back and forth over it. Only when it swelled for a moment and a groan fell from him, did Reia lean forward while placing her shins on his thighs so she could lift herself.

She didn’t stop kissing him even when his tongue moved faster, like it wanted to bypass her own and enter her mouth as though it was in the way.

It paused when she tucked the tip of his purple cock against her dripping entrance. Then he huffed out a deep expire when she started to sink herself around his engorged cock, having to press herself down hard to get the head to pop inside. It was always a struggle since the rim of his cockhead a little too big to fit with ease.

“You are making me enter you,” he almost gasped, as if he was surprised. “You are pressing your—ah!” It popped through, and she slipped halfway down him. He groaned, one of his hands leaving her breast to grip her hips while his head tilted back to face the ceiling once more. “*Reia.*”

She moaned when he helped her burrow down, his hips thrusting up like he was impatient for her to envelope him within the snug walls of her pussy.

As always, heat warmed her from the inside, and her body burned slightly from that wonderful, stretched feeling, telling her she was full of Orpheus. Her body sang for it.

His tentacles twitched as they circled her backside and hips, clamping onto her and seeming to drag her down even further.

“Have you never had sex with a woman on top?”

He seemed too surprised by this for her to think anything else.

“No.” He shook his head when he settled, his initial shock and pleasure calming so he could look to her once more. “You want to fuck me instead?”

“Mhm.”

She nodded and leaned forward to kiss him as she tried to raise her hips. She was yanked back before she even got an inch up his cock. When she tried again, she looked down to see his tentacles were preventing her from moving.

Orpheus usually held her so that he could grind back and forth into her, using his strength to fight his own body holding her to him.

“Can you release your tentacles for a moment?”

He did as she asked, and they squirmed as though they were unhappy. He grunted like the action was uncomfortable.

She looked around her body, wondering how she was supposed to do this. After a few seconds of thinking, feeling his cock fluttering with his heartbeat and wanting desperately to move around it, she eventually shuffled her feet, so they were resting beneath her backside on top of him.

It pushed her forward and her abdomen pressed against his. She had to steady her hands on his firm, muscled chest,

but his tentacles curled around her ankles instead, gripping them in loops.

She grinned from her ingenious idea and faced him, before seeing if it worked as she lifted her hips. Freedom gave her the ability to move up him as much as her body would allow, which was only about a quarter of the way.

Orpheus didn't seem to mind as he wrapped his arms around her completely, holding one of her breasts in his hand as it circled back around her. He stroked and plucked her throbbing nipple while licking at her neck, her jaw, her lips as she moved on him.

The frills of his cock were sliding over the ridge of her G-spot, the area that had her panting as she tried to move faster on him, harder, her mind growing dazed while her body grew needy, and hungry, and selfish.

His smoky mahogany and pine scent filled her lungs on every draw in, making her feel as though she was drowning, and yet she wanted more of it.

She grinded on him, circling her hips so he would touch everywhere. *Fuck, this feels really good.* Somehow different.

Reia was the one in control, the one dictating the depth and speed and although she wanted faster, she was getting deep and hard as she tried to slam her body down.

"I like this, Reia," he said, licking her everywhere he could reach while she let him as she focused on moving for them both. "I get to see you, and your face looks so good while you use my cock."

He licked inside her mouth by slipping his tongue past her parted lips. It folded, and swirled, tasting everything from her tongue, her teeth, her cheeks, and even the roof of her mouth like he wanted to steal all of her saliva.

She moaned as she lost herself to this. Her body started to clamp him in spasms, seeking the slow release she was giving herself.

Pulling away while trying to move faster even though her body felt heavy, her head fell back.

“Y-you haven’t said it back to me yet.”

She dug her fingertips through his long fur of his chest as she tried to aid herself to lift.

“Said what?”

Her head lolled forward so she could look at him and found his was tilted.

“That you love me.”

Her brows creased when white flashed in his orbs as though with fear or worry, before his mind got distracted with her pussy slipping around him and they returned to their purple.

“Don’t stop moving,” he groaned, his cock swelling like he’d pulsated. He looked down to where she was riding him, and his claws dug a little deeper as he watched himself disappearing inside her channel. “Your cunt feels so good moving on me. I like that you want to do this to me, to fuck yourself with my cock. I want to feel you come around me while you do this, like you want to milk me for my seed yourself.”

A shiver crawled over her flesh, and she tried to work harder on him. Her cry of answer made him thrust, hitting inside her deeper, and it almost made her forget what she’d been saying.

She wanted to keep moving, to give him exactly what he’d just told her he wanted.

“Orpheus?” she questioned around panted breaths.

When he realised she was starting to slow because he wasn’t answering her, he finally said, “I don’t know what that feels like. I have never felt it.”

He never loved Katerina? Tenderness spread throughout her chest, making her stomach flutter with adoration for him.

She may have been Orpheus’ first human, but there were so many things Reia was experiencing with him that they never had, and she was so happy.

A sweet smile filled the features of her face as she quickened her hips once more. She grinded on his cock, moving her hips back and forth while going up and down, trying to make it feel deeper for him.

“I love you, Orpheus.” She cupped the sides of his jaws and pressed her lips to his snout, to the side of it, around it. Tiny little kisses everywhere on his bony skull. “I love your face, your body, your cock and the way it feels inside me. I love your heart and how it wants to be gentle with me, and yet you can be so naughty sometimes. I love the way you smell and your voice. I love you, exactly how you are.”

His glowing orbs turned bright pink at her words and the way she said them. She giggled when he brought his hand up to cover an eye as though he was confused in seeing the colour.

“And I think you love me too. I think that’s why your eyes turn pink.” He tilted his head at her as though he was uncertain. “How do you feel when they are this colour?”

“Warm inside, and I feel whole. It makes me want to hold you and be as close as possible so that we are one. That there is no one else in the world I want but you.”

She rubbed her forehead against his snout.

“That’s how I feel too. That’s how I know.”

His hands tightened on her to make her stop, and she pulled back to gaze at him. He looked as though he was thinking.

“Yes,” he said softly, nuzzling his snout against her jaw right in front of her ear. “I love you very deeply, my little doe. You are precious to me.”

She nuzzled him back. “I love you too.”

And Reia was planning on showing him just how much she loved him tonight. However, she was going to get him to help her with this by lifting her up and down as she worked her pussy on him. He was thick and long, and she wanted to feel that wonderful cock stroking her insides, just like how she adored.

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Reia stirred awake just as the sun was going down in the late afternoon. The gloom and mist of the Veil's forest was a greyish blue with the darkness slowly enveloping it as she peeked out of the window over Orpheus' body.

An ache radiated through her stomach, making her feel as though she'd been punched in the gut repeatedly. *We were going all night.* And, perhaps, her much smaller and weaker body couldn't keep up with it all.

In the moment it had been wonderful, but now that she was relaxed and had rested, it felt like the day after a rigorous bout of exercise.

It hadn't been as rough as it'd been outside, like Orpheus didn't want to go crazy with her body, but it was still a lot.

She continued to gaze outside with heavy lids, letting the warmth of his body comfort her as she woke by herself. It was odd considering he was usually awake before her, but she figured he was exhausted after the last two days of running without rest.

If I'm his bride, then what does that make him? Her groom, her husband? That concept felt odd, especially since they hadn't and probably wouldn't marry in the conventional way.

But she was with him for life, however long it may be, and she knew that. She was still waiting to be upset about it or feel a hint of regret, but it never came.

Despite how much his soft breaths and grunts of sleep threatened to pull her under once more, her eyes caught something resting on the windowsill from outside.

Reia frowned and lifted herself better to see.

A feather? A white one, to be exact.

As not to disturb her usually light sleeping companion, she slowly and gingerly lifted his arms from her and untangled their legs. Thankfully, his cock and all its limbs had receded back into his body since she doubted she could have moved those without waking him.

After going to her room, which housed her wardrobe, she dressed in the gown she used to sleep in before she slept naked by Orpheus' side. It was easy to put on in comparison to everything else.

Reia went outside, not needing to be afraid if the salt circle was broken when she could turn herself ghostly at a moment's notice. *He was right, I'll always be safe.* Kind of. As long as she was quick and smart.

When she made it to the window, she reached to pick up the feather to inspect it. *This belongs to the Witch Owl.* She looked around the yard for any sign of her.

Her eyes caught the starkness of white in the darkness of the forest. A human covered in a cloak of white feathers sat on a low hanging branch as she watched Reia from afar.

She'd been waiting.

Reia approached her, taking in the details of her human body that she'd never seen clearly.

Her skin was dark. A deep shade of brown that was smooth and beautiful. Her coal dark eyes pierced into Reia's own, fanned with even darker lashes than her skin. She thought she saw tight ringlet curls underneath the cloak hood but wasn't quite sure.

She wore no shoes, and the white dress she wore was pristine. It came to the middle of her thighs while dipping heavily down her chest to reveal her generous cleavage. It was short-sleeved, and feathers had been pinned into it around the chest and shoulders. On the hood of her feathery cloak, multiple feathers stuck up in two places to appear like ears.

The Witch Owl began kicking her crossed ankles back and forth as Reia drew close.

“Hello. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Reia said while lifting her feather that had been on the windowsill. “You keep leaving me these.”

“And, you keep following them,” she replied, her voice deep and yet completely feminine. There was strength in it, confidence and sensuality. “You’ve been a very good human in letting me guide you.”

“You’re lucky I have.” She met her humour with an upturn of her chin. “It’s only because you made the garden grow, and that Orpheus trusts in you, that I was able to follow your clues to the bookshop.”

“Perhaps it is instinctual that he trusts me.” *Ah yes. A person who speaks in riddles, just my favourite thing.* Not. “Are you not going to step out of the salt circle?”

She pointed to it separating them. She would question why she wanted her to leave it, but she didn’t need to. Reia, with a confident raise of her brow, turned ghostly as she stepped over it. There was nothing the Witch Owl, or any other creature lurking in the forest, could do to her now.

She didn’t look surprised as she curled her lips into a smile.

“Did you know I was going to be taken by the Demon King? Is that why you gave me all the books?”

The Witch Owl tilted her head to the side so that all her thick and curly dark brown hair fell over that shoulder. She flashed Reia a wide grin of teeth.

“Not at all, but it wasn’t hard to guess what would happen. You wanted to learn how to wield a sword, and I gave a way to teach. History wanted to repeat itself, but it did not expect a girl to be her own knight in shining armour.”

A mocking snort of laughter burst from Reia. “I got stabbed in the back by a dagger and died, some hero I was.”

The Witch Owl turned her head to the house.

“But you were his. You killed his past and gave him a future he has always sought. How does it feel to be a Phantom?”

“Like I can escape the world.” She folded her arms across her chest and lifted a brow at the strange person before her still sitting in the tree and kicking her legs. “You knew I would become one if I gave him my soul, so why didn’t you tell him?”

“Sometimes mystery leaves us wanting more.”

“Then what of the children’s book? It was very funny where you left your feather.” She scoffed while tightening her arms. “Beauty and the Beast, really?”

The Witch Owl tilted her head the other way.

“Didn’t you enjoy reading it to him? Your story is not the same, but you still fell in love with someone which most find hideous.”

It was becoming annoying that all these different beings were watching them.

“But the beast was a dick in the beginning, Orpheus was kind to me the entire time.”

“He was also worse. You were almost eaten many times. I didn’t think you would survive, and yet here you are, speaking with me as though I have done something wrong.”

Reia inhaled deeply through her nose before letting her outward breath soften her muscles. She was feeling a little offensive for no reason.

She helped me. I have no reason to be rude.

“Okay,” she conceded with a sigh. “Why are you here now though?”

“Why can I not be? You are a product of my design. Can I not speak with you when I am the reason you are here?”

“Is there something you want to say to me?”

“Is there something you want to know?”

Tension filled her muscles once more. Reia’s little patience was only at ease when with Orpheus. This woman looked human, but was undeniably strange.

“You are the one who guided me to come speak with you and waited for me to do so. I would rather be inside with Orpheus if there is no point to this.” When she didn’t say anything or react, only one question came to mind, one that caused her to frown. “Why are you even helping him? What’s in this for you?”

The Witch Owl flipped her leg over the tree branch before moving the other over as well, then she fell backwards to swing upside down by the backs of her knees.

With her hair bundled inside the hood of her cloak as she hung there, she cocked her head to the side.

“Can a mother not care for her child?”

Reia's lips parted in shock, surprise, disbelief.

“Mother? How’s that even possible? You look like a human.”

“I once was, but now I am like you.” She lifted her hand to cup her chin. “I gave my soul to the void in return for eternal life and magic, and in mating with him, I have given birth to Orpheus’ kind.”

“What the fuck is the void?”

And how the hell can someone have sex with it?!

“A spirit of darkness. It is not easy to mate with an entity made of mist and cloud.”

Reia wished she could truly feel her own hand rubbing her forehead in confusion. All she felt was light pressure.

“You’re telling me that Duskwalkers come from a Phantom and the void fucking? How’s that even possible?”

“How is anything possible? Why can humans live on Earth? Why do the trees grow? How did creatures learn how to wield magic? All of this, which seems impossible, is possible.”

“Shit, I guess that’s true.”

Reia eyed the Witch Owl warily.

She was currently in love with a Duskwalker and happily had sex with him. She couldn’t, shouldn’t, have prejudices about this woman sleeping with some spirit of darkness.

“So, you’re just here to help your children? What about the others, then?”

“My bull-horned son was tortured, but I saved him from death. My ram-horned son is travelling, and I have made sure he is safe. My Impala-horned son was lonely, and I have helped him seek love. My deer-horned son is still learning, but I have guided him to his brother who can teach him. There are the two others who have no need of me as they have each other. Then there are the few who have not fully formed their skulls yet.”

“You only give birth to sons?”

Her coal eyes crinkled with humour. “I give birth to nothing, and the first human they eat dictates their gender, like with Demons.”

“If you’re their mother, then why don’t you tell them then?”

“When they are faceless, they know I am safe, and that I will help. They know, even if they do not remember. They trust me. Why should I care beyond that?”

Reia’s felt herself paling at the idea. *I think Orpheus would want to know where he came from.*

“If you want to help him, then what do you need from me now?”

“Nothing, I came to help you instead. There is one thing I came to warn you of.” The Witch Owl pointed to Reia’s stomach. “I would be careful of your womb if you do not seek to give birth to darkness.”

Reia shuffled back a step while crossing her arms over her belly as if to hide it.

“What do you mean? I’m a human and he’s a Duskwalker. We can’t have children together.”

Her grin was confusing as she was upside down, appearing like a frown at the same time.

“But you are not a human. You are a phantom, as am I.”

She turned incorporeal in front of Reia’s very eyes, slipping from the tree branch to hover above the ground. She stood to face her and then walked forward.

She placed her hand on Reia’s shoulder and she *felt* it, in the same way she felt the pressure of her touching her own transparent flesh.

“He is made of spirit and human and has now made you spirit and human. Your soul is tied to him and now you walk on the cusp of life and death, never truly alive, never truly dead.” She placed her hand on Reia’s stomach. “You mate with a child of darkness, and you will make more if you are not careful. I was not ready when it happened the first time.”

“Then…” Reia stumbled away from her as unease filled her. “How the hell am I supposed to be careful? It’s not like I can just *will* myself not to have a child!”

And the likelihood that Orpheus would come inside her, fill her with so much seed that it literally poured from her, meant she’d probably be pregnant within a freaking day!

Oh fuck. They’d had sex three times last night! *I could already be pregnant!*

The Witch Owl was right, Reia was *not* ready for something like this. She’d only just made the decision to give him her damn soul.

“He has magic, he can learn. All he needs to do is have a reason to seal your womb from him, and it will be protected. He learns to do spells by wanting something, like wanting to protect a human he had brought to the Veil, or creating

illusions to stop people and Demons from thinking he travelled alone.”

“He can learn something like that to prevent it?”

Her shoulders eased, but it didn’t stop the worry that it might already be too late.

“Yes, although all can learn to heal and protect, Orpheus is best with protection magic. They are generally filled with too much hunger to heal, which is why he has not learnt yet. He will do so with you now that you have taken away his hunger.”

“How did I even do that? He only ate my soul.”

She smiled once more for Reia.

“Because, like their father, they are soul eaters. They consume flesh in the desire to consume the soul it cases, but they cannot be eaten in this way.”

“It has to be given,” Reia stated, placing her fore knuckle against her lips in thought and tapping them with it.

“This is a lie,” she said, her face hardening for the first time. “The void can eat all souls, but he can only be given one to mate with. My children can only eat one soul, and then they are stuck with that human, whether they want to be with them or not. I have told him that he must be given a soul so he does not tie a human to himself that hates him, but it could have been taken if he truly wanted to.”

“Would he have?” Reia asked with creased brows.

“If he had thought it was possible, perhaps.” Her lips pursed with irritation. “And if he had done so with Katerina, he would have been miserable.”

“I understand.”

Of course, she understood after meeting her. She would never have accepted Orpheus, no matter how hard he tried to please her.

He would have taken mine when I was dying if he knew he could. Orpheus loved her, he wouldn’t have let her be apart from him. She didn’t know how she felt about that since she wouldn’t have wanted her choice taken from her.

“Is that all you wanted to tell me?” Reia asked, worried about what other damning things she could learn.

“Yes, that is all. However, I ask that when he has found a human, that you give the amulet to my antler-horned son. He will lose it if you give it to him now.” The Witch Owl turned physical and started pulling her cloak over her body more as if she wanted to hide inside it. “And thank you for making my Impala-horned son help him. I don’t think he would have gone as far as take him to the village without your interference.”

“No problem, I guess. You’re leaving now?”

With the way she was fidgeting, it appeared as though she was about to take her leave.

“Yes. There are many places I must be at once, and it is difficult to arrive always in time.”

She closed the middle seams of her cloak and began to change, feathers growing out of her body while she took on the shape of a white owl. Her face didn’t morph, but the hood drew down over it and grew a beak as eyes began to appear.

Reia’s eyes widened as she watched, taking in the awe-striking transformation.

Once she was done, she turned and immediately took flight, flapping her wings so she could dart through the canopy of trees. She was gone from view within seconds.

Standing there for a long while in confusion, shock, and being totally overwhelmed, she eventually sighed and shook her head. *Screw this, I’m hungry and want tea.* She’d think about all this while she was making herself dinner, since it was so late.

She walked back to the house, turning physical only once she was inside so the opening of the door didn’t wake Orpheus. Not that it mattered. She tried to be quiet, but cooking was always noisy.

He didn’t wake though, and she ate quietly while sipping on ginger and honey tea.

A solid hour passed while she thought, wishing that damn nagging pain in her abdomen would cease. *Okay, so maybe he was right about holding back.*

Once she was finished with her food, she sat at the dining table and was barely able to stop herself from twiddling her thumbs. It was unusual to be in the house by herself while he slept. He was always with her, and when he was out she could be as loud as she wanted.

I could read. The idea bored her.

She turned her head to the cabinet above the kitchen. *He did ask me to make a new bell.*

Quietly, more so that she didn't get caught right in the act rather than actually waking him, she moved her chair to the kitchen counter and stood on it. She retrieved everything she wanted before returning it to the table so she could start to work on it.

She made it the same, and just when she was done, she heard heavy footsteps making their way down the short hallway.

"Reia?" he asked with a gravelly voice like it was groggy and sleep-filled, emerging while only wearing his trousers as if he'd quickly put something on.

"What's wrong, Orpheus?"

His eyes are white.

She hadn't expected to be greeted with anything but a well satisfied and content Duskwalker. Placing the finished bell on the table, she approached him.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

He started lifting her arms as though he wanted to check her. She started checking herself along with him.

"I don't think so."

"Then why do you smell of blood?"

She lifted her gaze to him while she frowned deeply.

"Is that what woke you?"

"Yes."

She'd been making all this noise and he only woke because of the smell of her blood. *He still sounds so tired.* He'd essentially crumbled into sleep after the last time they'd been intimate.

He started sniffing her hair, her neck, her chest, moving lower as if he was trying to find the source. Her eyes snapped open wide, and she lightly pushed him back.

She ran to the washroom.

Reia squealed in delight when she realised that the annoying, nagging pain in her stomach had been because she was bleeding between her thighs.

"Yes!" She pumped her arm into the air. "Never been so happy to have my freaking period."

Never in her life would she think she'd have a pregnancy scare with a Duskwalker! She bounced down the hallway, thankful they didn't have to fret about him eating her at the smell of her blood now.

He twisted his head at her, seeming to be utterly confused. "I don't understand why you're happy. Doesn't this usually cause you pain?"

"Oh, I'm definitely in pain, but I'd rather this than be pregnant!"

His eyes turned dark yellow in curiosity. "But we cannot make a child. Why would you be worried about this?"

Her cheeks heated slightly, as if she was nervous about being in trouble.

"I, uh, kind of had a conversation with the Witch Owl earlier."

A light growl *immediately* emitted from his throat.

"I told you not to speak with her."

She rolled her eyes at him and the fact he never seemed to learn she rarely did as she was told. There were more important things to speak about anyway.

"I know where you came from, Orpheus, and what you actually are. You're part-spirit, part-human. And when I gave

you my soul, you turned me into a Phantom – which is also part spirit.”

“I still don’t understand why this would make you worried when you weren’t before.”

They’d never spoken about this, and Reia had freely let him release inside her because she hadn’t thought it would matter. She didn’t know if having a child with Orpheus was something she wanted, but being able to have the choice was a relief. Her future was uncertain. All she knew was that it would always have him in it.

She laughed as she reached up to cup his snout and drag his head closer so she could rest her own against it.

“You made me like you, and it means we’re compatible now.”

He lowered to a crouch to bring himself to her eye level.

“So, this means we can make a child?”

“Yes.” She gave him a little smile as she said, “But I still don’t want to now.”

Orpheus shrunk away from her, his eyes turning a deep blue. “You don’t want to do this with me?”

Her forehead crinkled when she realised he appeared hurt by what she said.

“I meant not yet. I’m not ready for something like that.”

That seemed to ease him, and his eyes returned to yellow. He crept forward, tapping his snout with a claw in thought before he did it to the lower part of her stomach.

“But I would like to do this. I didn’t know I could place my seed in your womb for you to grow, but I would like you to bear my youngling.” He continued to tap her stomach, as if that would magically make it happen. “I will protect it.”

“I’m sure you would,” she replied, backing up only for Orpheus to follow. “But not now.”

“Why not now, Reia?”

Okay, so maybe she shouldn’t have told him since he now was very set on the idea. She hadn’t expected him to be so wanting of a child.

What would it even look like?

The Witch Owl had said she should be careful if she didn't want to birth darkness, so would it be like Orpheus? A Duskwalker? She couldn't even begin to imagine what he would have looked like as a child that wouldn't have had a skull. She knew all the fur, fins, and flesh on him came from what he ate.

She was worried what strange thing she'd give birth to.

"Because I would like to be alone with you." He lifted his face to her and gave an inquisitive tilt of his head. "A child would take my attention away from you."

"Could I also be involved in the child's attention?"

Shit. She thought that would work to deter him.

She narrowed her eyes to give him a stern expression.

"Orpheus, I'm saying no."

"No?"

He started tapping at his snout once more, and it was only something she'd seen him do when he was very deep in thought.

"And I would like you to figure out the spell the Witch Owl told me you can do to stop it from happening."

"But I don't know how to do that."

She pursed her lips.

I have to give him a reason to want to learn the spell.

Folding her arms across her chest, she lifted her chin while turning her head to the side.

"Well, I won't be having sex with you until you figure it out."

She saw in her peripheral that his eyes turned white once more. He came forward, reaching up so he could place his hand on the side of her face.

"But I don't know how to do a spell like that," he repeated a little more hastily. "And I want to be close to you."

"Then figure it out."

She stepped away and gave him her squinted, narrowed stare once more.

“I won’t come inside of you until I learn it,” he offered, his tone telling her he was becoming distressed about this possibility.

The idea of being coated in that hot liquid sent a shiver of delight through her system.

She wondered who would be more upset about this considering Reia didn’t actually want to forgo having Orpheus’ cock inside her. She enjoyed their times of passion together. She wanted to falter since she knew being intimate was more than just about pleasure to him.

Instead, she snorted a laugh.

“That won’t work!” she exclaimed. “You’re like a bloody fountain, Orpheus, and even your pre-come can get me pregnant. Once you learn it, we will continue. Until then, we can still touch, but just not in that way.”

He gave a whining groan. “As long as you will be happy, I will do as you have asked.”

Reia softened her expression and smiled for him as she reached out to pet his face.

“Thank you. I have made you a new bell. Would you like me to put both on you now?”

His eyes turned bright pink, and he nodded, making her heart swell for him. *Silly bonehead. You’ve loved me for a long while.*

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Orpheus roamed the surface in which the humans lived, hunting for his female that wanted meat to eat with her vegetables.

Now that he was no longer hungry, he knew this task would be much easier as he wouldn’t lose himself to a frenzy. Unfortunately, something seemed to have the herd of deer he was following on high alert, and he was unable to get close without spooking them.

The chase still made him excited. He’d ended up viciously slaughtering the one he’d recently managed to catch, rendering it unable to be taken through the Veil.

He’d attempted to catch a rabbit, but it was quick, and he’d ended up squishing it by accident when he slammed his hand down on it. He’d never tried to catch a rabbit before, but Reia said they made good meat for stews, and he’d been curious to know how’d she’d be able to teach him how to cook it.

It was the first time he’d left her in two weeks for an extended period of time and he was very keen to get back to her. A day had already passed, and he longed to see her, hold her, smell her, and listen to her hum since she’d started doing that lately.

He hoped it was because she was content with him.

It’d only taken him a week to figure out the spell that stopped her from bearing his child. He hadn’t liked not being able to connect with her, and his urgency for it pushed him to learn. It was only after the first time they had sex again that she started humming to herself.

Orpheus walked while crouching on his feet and hands, moving slowly as not to jostle his bells too much. He was starting to think perhaps the tiny noise they made were what the deer were being startled by, and he considered placing them in his pocket of his pants for now.

He didn’t want to, and he worried he’d break them since he couldn’t see behind his skull to look at his horns.

Next time, I’ll ask her to take them off before I go hunting. At least he knew now.

The morning sun was bright in his eyes, but felt warm against his body, heating his clothes and the flesh beneath it. Now that spring was nearly over, there were many colours and flowers.

He’d once picked flowers for Katerina. He’d found them pretty, like her, and had wanted to give them to her in hopes she’d find them pretty too. She hadn’t liked them.

Would Reia like flowers? The idea she might give him that beaming bright smile she wore, the one where she looked as though her heart was melting in her chest in a similar way to how her smile made him feel, begged him to try. *I will take some when I leave. If she doesn’t like them, I will not do so again.*

He wanted to give her red roses since she smelt of them. He wanted her to understand why he adored her scent, and he knew there were many elderberry bushes just on the cliff edge of the Veil. He could present both for her to smell so she could share in what he experienced within her presence.

Just as he was coming upon the herd of deer, seeing them just a little way past the trees, the smell of elderberries and roses flittered into his senses.

Did he want to go back to her so deeply he was imagining her scent?

“Orpheus?” He heard that lovely voice from behind him, and he swiftly spun around.

There she sat in a small area of grass that had yellow weed flowers sprouting from it. She was sitting on her hip with her legs curled to the side, one hand resting on the ground to support herself.

His head twisted to the side so sharply that it almost went upside down.

“Reia?” He came towards her. “What are you doing here?”

Did she follow me? But why would she? He didn’t know how he felt about this. She wasn’t within the safety of their home protections, and she wasn’t even wearing shoes to shelter her little feet.

She wore her pale blue dress that was similar to her pink one she’d had to fix because of the cut in the back of it from the dagger that had killed her. Orpheus hated that she also bore the scar of it between her shoulder blades – a constant reminder that he’d failed her.

She didn’t bear the scaring from when she’d apparently been eaten by a Demon, something that had distressed him to discover. They both thought that perhaps any new wounds she gained would disappear the next time she was killed – not that he was keen to find out the true answer to that.

She had small ones from the times he accidently cut her with his claws, and he’d much rather see them there than to know they were gone because she’d been injured so badly she’d died.

At his question, she lifted her hands to stare down at her palms.

“I-I don’t know. One minute I was eating my breakfast in the garden.” She met his gaze when he placed his hand over her hair to pat her, a thrill soaring through him at being

able to touch her. “And then suddenly I disappeared and showed up behind you on the ground.”

A day has passed. It was roughly this time of the day he’d left their home to go hunting.

It took a day for Mavka’s wounds to start to heal, no matter how big or how small. A day of missing a limb completely before it regrew within a second. A day of being blacked out as only a skull, before the body regrew in a bubbling, goopy, black liquid before a solid form hardened.

She will always be with me. He once wondered what would happen if a human gave him their soul and they abandoned him by running away. How could they always be with him if they left even after giving him their soul?

Was this his answer to that question?

“Perhaps we can only be apart for a day.”

Like a Mavka’s wounds healing, her body would appear with him in a day.

“That’s really inconvenient,” she groaned, falling back to recline on the grass. His heart shrivelled a little, thinking she didn’t want to be with him right now, until she said, “I didn’t even get to have a single bite of my breakfast before I disappeared. I’m going to be really hungry soon.”

Orpheus chuckled at her, his jaws parting at the depth of his humour.

“I will find you food, my little bride. I was hunting deer, but I won’t be able to do that with you here now.”

She rolled to sit up and raised a brow at him.

“Why not?”

His chuckled deepened. “Because you are loud and clumsy, Reia. You will scare them away.”

Shuffling to her feet, she placed her hands on her hips to give him a glare that was empty of any real anger.

“Not if I do this.”

She turned ghostly, making her feet hover above the ground and silencing her near completely. If it wasn’t for his

impeccable hearing, he would have struggled to hear her speak.

“That’s true, but I would rather you be home where you are safest.”

She turned physical once more before rolling her eyes at him with a huff. “I’m always going to be safe, Orpheus. I can turn into a freaking ghost! Not even you can touch me.”

He snapped his jaws in annoyance, to make a sharp chomping sound. He didn’t like that he couldn’t touch her like that, and she often liked to play with him by turning transparent in his arms to tease him.

“Fine,” he bit lightly. “You may stay with me until my hunting is done. I will find you something to eat now, though, so you don’t go hungry.” He reached his hand out to her as he stood on his legs, and she took it. “May I carry you? I like holding you on my arm.”

“Sure.”

She waited for him to bend over and stretch his arm out behind her, and she sat on the crook of his elbow. He lifted her, wrapping his arm and hand securely around her waist before he began to walk with her.

“You know,” she said slowly, looking around at the bright forest that was nothing like the dark of the Veil’s. “This reminds me of the last time you carried me above the surface.”

“I am thankful for that walk every day, even though you were noisy and wouldn’t stop complaining of the cold.”

“There was snow everywhere! Don’t you understand how cold I was? And, I basically had to beg you to slow down, and you still wouldn’t!”

She grabbed one of his horns and started shaking his head everywhere as he began to laugh. *I enjoy teasing her.* He was new to it since he felt comfortable to do so now that he knew she wouldn’t leave him.

“You were strange even then. I should have eaten you the day the Demonslayers attacked me, but the sound of you

laughing in my mouth startled me.”

“It was a moment of insanity. I knew you were going to, and it was kind of creepy having your fangs *slowly* slipping around my head.”

He tilted his head up so he could bump the side of his snout against her. “Then I am thankful for your moment of madness, because it means you are here with me now.”

Reia grumbled something along the lines of him being too sweet, but he never understood when she called him something that was the taste of food. He thought something being too sweet was bad, like how he didn’t like honey for that very reason.

However, he knew it was a good thing coming from her, like a compliment, and accepted it.

“You made me a promise, by the way,” she said, kicking her legs back and forth individually to swing beneath his arm.

“A promise?” There was a task he had said he would do but had not fulfilled? *Am I in trouble?*

She bent her body forward, trusting he wouldn’t let her fall so she could do so freely. Her hair curtained the other side of her head as she looked to him while giving him a smirk that looked sinister coming from her.

“You said you would kill those who hurt me from my village.”

Orpheus immediately redirected his path, and she lifted her head up when she noticed to search the forest.

“Where are you going?”

“To your village,” he answered plainly.

“Really?” she almost seemed to giggle. “You’re really going to take me back to my village so that you will kill them?”

He brought his gaze to her, not understanding her tone.

“Do you not want me to?”

“Yes! I very much do, but I don’t think it should be all three of them. Those that helped Chad only did it because

they wanted to impress him. They weren't the ones who ever actually physically hurt me by throwing things. Darren, the man that was being offered to you, was one the people who helped him."

"I will end them all for you, Reia, if that is what you seek. Whatever will make you content."

Actually, he really wanted to. They had harmed his little doe, tormented her, and he wanted to maim them for doing so.

"I'll think about it on the way. What would happen if you were to eat Chad now?"

"I don't think it would make me hungry or satisfy me, but I would become a little more human, obtain a little more humanity."

Would she want me to change? Orpheus hadn't thought that if perhaps Reia might want him to be less furry, or monstrous.

"Hmm," she sounded thoughtful before she scrunched her nose up. "Well, I don't like that. Could we feed him to the Mavka? He's really stupid, he needs to obtain more humanity."

A light chuckle of agreeance tickled him.

"He *is* rather stupid. We can do that."

Jealousy and annoyance flared in his stomach, disliking that Reia cared so much for the antler-horned Mavka, but he tried not to show it. Orpheus was just being, as Reia called him, selfish and possessive.

She accepts me. She liked him how he was, and that made him feel loved and wanted.

"Good. I want to do that, then." She continued to kick her legs while she seemed to think for a long while. "You aren't taking me home straight away. Does that mean you trust me to be on the surface with you? That I'll be safe?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

The fact she was now a Phantom eased him. She wouldn't be killed easily, and even if she was, she'd return to him. He

also trusted that she wouldn’t try to abandon him. She was his, and she wanted to be.

“So, you’ll take me travelling one day so I can see the world?”

“If that is what you want.”

As long as she was with him, he’d take her anywhere she wanted to go.

“What will happen to our home if we don’t go back to it?”

“Once the protections fade, the Demons will attempt to inhabit it. They will probably partially destroy it if we are gone for too long.”

He was actually a little saddened by the idea that their home could be damaged while they were gone. But, if this was something Reia wanted, he would accept it and repair it when they returned once they started travelling – whenever she decided she wanted to.

“You said that the protection spell that you placed for my village when you took me only lasts for ten years, and can’t be redone during that time at all.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

He probably would have tried to take a new offering as soon as the one he’d taken had died if that weren’t the case.

Instead, he’d spend a decade by himself, waiting for it to fade so he could bargain for a life that might stay with him once more. He lifted his snout and licked the jaw of the one he’d found, and was very happy with.

“In that case, I’ll wait until then so that you can place it around our home instead to protect it while we’re gone.” *She knew I wouldn’t be placing another for the humans since I have her.* “Ten years isn’t that long if we have eternity together.”

Orpheus’ vision turned a bright yellow. He loved her idea, and he was pleased that she wanted to protect the home in which they shared. The one they had memories in, the one she had begun to decorate for herself, and brought him

great enjoyment in seeing her do so. He hadn’t wanted to lose any of it, and she was willing to wait for something she wanted in order to preserve it.

She is perfect, mind, heart, body, and soul. Reia is perfect for me.

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Also by Opal Reyne

DUSKWALKER BRIDES

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A Soul to Touch *(Coming February 2023)*
A Soul to Guide *(TBA 2023)*
A Soul to Revive *(TBA 2023)*

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Thank you so much for reading **A Soul to Keep**, the first book in the **Duskwalker Brides** series.

I first started writing this book because I asked multiple smutty reader groups for a main male character just like Orpheus, and not one single person could recommend me something. NOT. ONE.

I wanted a monster, and my monster apparently didn't exist in the smutty paranormal world.

I'm a very big anime and manga lover, and I originally got into a character like this because of *The Ancient Magus' Bride.* Elias is a cutie and I loved him. The world in which they live was inspired by *DemonSlayer,* and you can probably see their similarities, despite them also being very, very different.

I'm so glad I wrote this story. Regardless of any negative reviews I may get, I wrote this book for me. I love the characters, I love the world, and I love their story.

The next book, **A Soul to Heal**, will feature a plus sized character and the nameless Duskwalker we met in this book. He has a lot to learn, and learning it all will be rather comedic. *"What's this thing?" A pussy, my friend, and you're going to discover just how yummy it is.*

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